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Fantasy and Forensics
Fantasy Adventure Box Set 1

Books 1 – 4

Centaur of the Crime

The Deer Prince's Murder

Grand Theft Griffin

A Perjury of Owls

Special Bonus Novella: Forensics and Dragon Fire

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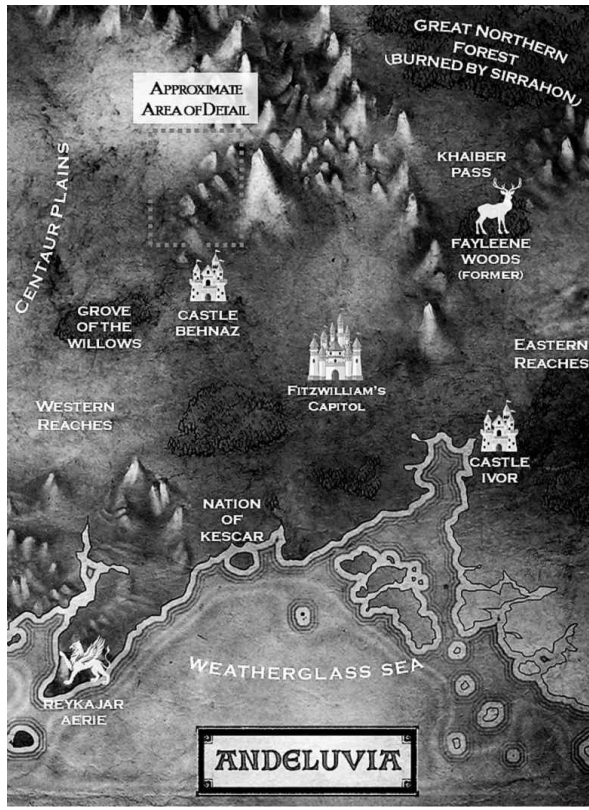

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Afterword
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BOOK ONE: CENTAUR OF THE CRIME

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Chapter One

Just my rotten luck.

In the movies, when crime scene analysts arrive at the site of a murder, it's usually deep in some dark, woody glen. If the murder takes place in an urban area, the cops know enough to hang around on the edges, quiet and respectful like mourners at a funeral. Call it in and set up the yellow tape so my work space stays pristine as fresh-fallen snow.

That no-touchee mojo wasn't working for me today.

The body of an adult white male had been discovered lying atop a heap of rubble, smack in the middle of a newly demolished city block. And there were enough cops stomping around the crime scene to put on a St. Patrick's Day parade.

I parked the van at the curb and squinted through the windshield to make sense of the site. This property was an ankle-turning warren of shattered concrete and tangled steel rebar. Low-rise buildings bordered three sides of the block. The far wall had been decorated with a multicolored spray-paint mural of the Aztec God, Quetzalcoatl.

Quetzo appeared to be giving everyone at the crime scene the finger. But then I've never been good at interpreting urban art.

I got out, went around back, and threw open the van's rear doors to suit up. I slipped a disposable jumpsuit-style jacket and pants over my civilian clothes, and then sat on the rear bumper. Warmth radiated from the metal. I hoped that the plastic pants wouldn't melt in the summer heat.

I tucked my long black locks into a hair net for that oh-so-attractive cafeteria lady look and then jammed the lot under a dark blue Dodgers baseball cap. Finally, I kicked off my flats and slipped into a pair of zip tack shoes that I'd nicknamed my 'stompy gothic boots of doom'. They wouldn't win any awards on the fashion runway, but they'd keep corpse juice out of my socks.

The shoes boosted my height by two inches. I'm already pretty

tall, at least for a woman, but when you're dealing with cops, men who each think they're as tough as Clint Eastwood and hung like Mr. Ed, every extra inch counts. Don't ask me why. I think it's a dominance thing.

I grabbed an aluminum case, heaved it up to my side, and slammed the van doors shut. Then I stepped over the worn side of the curb and picked my way through concrete gravel.

The debris formed a gentle slope of loose material that'd have been hell to walk through in my flats, but my stompy boots handled it just fine. One of the men separated himself from the mass of the LAPD's finest and waved as I approached. Hazel eyes, close-cropped hair, and a friendly face that shone through a perpetual haze of beard stubble.

I recognized Alanzo Esteban from working a couple of these joyful little scenes. One of the few detectives in Homicide who I liked. Judging by the bashful way he snuck glances at me when he thought I wasn't looking, the feeling was more than mutual.

"Why, *señora del acero*," he said with a smile. He was a handsome man, but it was his warm Latino accent that sent a thrill down my spine. "So good of you to join us, Dayna."

"Yeah, but I'm sure no lady of steel, no matter what you say," I fought to keep a grin off my face and lost. "Fill me in. What's going on here, Alanzo?"

Esteban had worked with me enough to know that I wasn't asking about the crime scene yet. I wanted to know why so many cops were wandering over the site, making my job harder and more miserable by the minute.

"Some *pendejo* dumped our dead guy in the middle of this demolition zone," he said. "Construction's due to start here on one of the mayor's pet projects. So you have politicos falling all over themselves to jump into everyone's soup. And when the Chief heard…"

I let out a groan. "He sent McClatchy out, didn't he?"

He nodded.

"Esteban, I'm not done with you yet!" came a harsh voice. We

traded a glance that spoke volumes.

"Speak of the devil," he said. "Come on, let's get this over with."

I followed Esteban across the tumbled surface of concrete and rebar. The sun beat down on the exposed city block and I pulled my cap brim down as far as it could go. Perspiration already stained the inside of my jumpsuit. I licked a stray bead of sweat from my lips and came away with the taste of body salt.

We came up to a barrel-chested, red faced man. His salt and pepper hair was balding and he clenched a red and black-tipped toothpick between his teeth. A gray pinstripe suit tented over his wide frame. Office wear for field work always marks you as one of two things: a rank amateur, or a politically appointed desk jockey.

Deputy Chief Bob McClatchy fell into both categories.

"Esteban, see what you can do," the man said, with a wave of one hand. "You know, tell these scene techies to hurry up. We've got real work to do."

"You can tell her yourself," Esteban said, indicating me with a nod.

McClatchy squinted at me like Esteban had brought him a bug to look at.

I put my hand out.

"Dayna Chrissie, Office of the Medical Examiner." McClatchy stared uncomprehendingly at my open palm for a moment. Then the automatic courtesy I was counting on kicked in, and he gingerly shook my hand. "We've met before. Phone booth shooting in Northridge."

"I remember," McClatchy finally said. "Not you. The case. Took your people four days to go over a crime scene the size of a shower stall. Real pain in the ass."

I shrugged. "Crime scene processing is always a pain in the ass if you do it right. And you're going to make it harder for me to do it right if your men keep combing the area for evidence."

He scowled at me. From the pattern of wrinkles on his face, I could tell that the scowl was one of his favorite expressions. Maybe he practiced in front of a mirror every morning before he went to work.

"Fine, anything to speed this mess up." He spoke to one of the

nearby officers and sent the man off to round up the boys in blue. He shifted the red and black toothpick in his mouth and then jabbed a finger at me. “You’re going to perform your initial report with me present, got that, Chrissie?”

Esteban coughed. McClatchy stared at him.

I pointed to the Dodgers insignia on my baseball cap. “I’m not LAPD, McClatchy. I’m a non-com private contractor.”

“A lot of the M.E. offices are moving that way,” Esteban added. “Gives people like Dayna here more flexibility. Also saves the city money.”

“Well,” McClatchy huffed, “I still want to be there–”

“Then come along,” I said brusquely.

I turned away and started hiking towards the yellow and black scene tape markers. I heard the two men follow in my wake, but I didn’t turn to talk with either of them. My meager store of patience had run bone dry.

When you come down to it, I think that’s why I got into this line of work in the first place. Compared to the living, dead people are so much more agreeable. They don’t try to pull rank, they just smell it.

Esteban stepped quickly to keep up at my side. “You got lucky,” he said. “Hector Reyes got here ten minutes before the rest of the local police division arrived.”

“That *is* good news,” I said. Hector was the best crime scene photographer in the department. If he got here before too many extra footprints were set down, we’d have more to work with than a smeary blur of shoe marks.

“Somebody called the body in around eleven this morning,” Esteban added, as we each slipped under the yellow tape perimeter. “No eyewitnesses to the killing. No reports of suspicious people or vehicles either.”

We reached the top of a small rise. I didn’t see the body at first, but my eye followed a little trail of red droplets that dotted the ground. Several little trails, actually, that led back to a patch of weeds that’d been half-crushed by a pair of feet clad in a pair of worn leather boots.

The stench of the body hit me. The corpse hadn't been lying out too long. Insects were just beginning to gather, and even in the burning heat of the Southern California summer, it smelled only of newly decomposing flesh. On the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending), this guy still only rated a five out of ten.

But it still made Detective Esteban pause. His Highness McClatchy reeled back as if someone had punched him in the gut.

I stepped up and took my first look at the body. Let my reptile brain sift through the images to pick out any curious, out of place details later. The corpse belonged to a man in his late thirties to early forties. Caucasian with sandy blonde hair. Well built. Looked like he'd been in good health and pounding the weights at the local gym.

And that's when I saw something that got my attention. In fact, it got my pulse pumping like I'd gone down to the local coffee shop and mainlined a triple espresso.

The skin on the man's arms was covered in little white scales like a snake.

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Chapter Two

I stopped a couple meters away from the body. The smell of decaying flesh hung heavy in the air, like a wet curtain. McClatchy looked ready to run, or start heaving.

At least it kept him quiet. Carefully, I set down the aluminum case I'd been lugging along and cracked it open. I hurriedly slipped on a surgical mask, pair of latex gloves, and a pair of shoe covers.

Then I looked to Esteban. "You up to taking some body pics of our John Doe for me?"

"I'm up for it," he replied. "Long as I don't have to get too close."

"No promises." I dug out a second set of gear for him and then handed him a camera from out of one of the case's padded compartments.

I grabbed a set of forceps, took a couple steps forward, and knelt by the body. I waved my hand through the holding pattern of flies that circled above the corpse and began my observations.

"Alanzo, snap me a set of photos starting at the feet up," I instructed. "Individual body parts, left-to-right. Close up shots on any wound pattern or blood spatter."

Esteban nodded and began clicking away with the camera.

I looked over the man's brown leather boots. Nice ones, too, by the look of it. Hand stitching that would've done justice to the kind of Italian loafers you'd find for sale on Rodeo Drive.

His dun-colored trousers were made of rough cloth. The light blue sleeveless top that looked like a throwback to what the 60's called a 'peasant' shirt. A very simple kind of tunic.

In fact, all of his clothes were simple. *Too* simple. The boot straps were adorned with a heavy iron buckle. So was his black leather belt. But his trousers were perfectly smooth, both on the sides, and in the crotch. No zipper teeth, no Levi's button-fly. Instead, John Doe had a kind of rough leather lacing holding his split together.

When was the last time anyone made clothes without zippers and

buttons?

Hell, when was the last time anyone made a pair of everyday-wear men's pants without *pockets*?

Next, I looked at the strange wounds on the body. Deep cuts or jagged slashes marked the corpse in a couple spots. One on the left-hand palm, a second on the forearm. Another on the side of the head, where an ear dangled by a strip of pasty flesh.

The worst of the slashing injuries yawed open in a fleshy red mouth that cleaved open the right-hand shoulder and exposed a compound fracture of the collarbone. I spotted a fleck of black against the white edge of bone. I snatched it out with a nimble flick of the forceps.

"What's that?" McClatchy demanded. His voice was muffled. Sounded like he'd pressed his nose into a pocket handkerchief. I heard the man fumbling in his pocket for something but I didn't waste the time to look up.

"Chip of metal." I turned the pinky-nail sized object over to get a better look. "Whoever sliced open our John Doe here like a side of beef may have left us a clue."

"Part of a blade?"

"These slashes sure as hell didn't come from a twelve-gauge." I caught Alanzo's eye and nodded towards my case. "Pull me a specimen bag out of there, would you?"

Esteban got one and held the edges open with his gloved fingers. I dropped the sample in and went back to work. The shoulder wound was definitely the nastiest of the cuts.

But that probably hadn't killed the man.

What probably did the dirty deed was the fist-sized hole in the center of the chest. Actually, it wasn't so much a hole as a fleshy, bloody *crater*. Whatever this guy'd been hit with, it had blown right through his shirt and smashed the sternum into bone powder.

Blood pooled at the bottom of the cavity in a sticky mass. I used the forceps to pull the shirt away to see the edge of the wound. The remaining skin on his chest also looked like it was made of tiny white scales.

I was still struggling to figure out whether this guy was some freak of nature when I took another look at his face. His features were strong, generically masculine. The eyes stared out into nothingness like glassy brown marbles.

But the 'scales' stopped at the base of the man's neck.

Suddenly my brain did one of its weird little *clicks* as it finally reached some conclusion. Those scales weren't the mark of some snake-human hybrid. It was a *pressure pattern* that had been etched onto the skin. Of course, that did jack squat for me, given that all it did was replace one mystery with another.

I leaned in closer to the body to get a better look. The itty-bitty hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as my nose caught the ghost of a scent. Something layered underneath the rotting-meat miasma of the corpse itself. I fought the nausea, rode it out like a wave on a choppy sea. I closed my eyes and inhaled, seeking that elusive scent.

First, I came up with sulfur. Then burnt charcoal. I moved my head back and forth, continuing to trust my senses. The sulfur-charcoal smell was strongest from the chest wound. And then, I found the scent I'd been looking for underneath the charred-sulfur. Something dry like fine gin, delicate like lace.

Then scent vanished in a heady rush of eucalyptus that wiped out my sense of smell.

I came within a hair's breadth of a snarl and looked up. That's what McClatchy had been digging for—a tube of menthol to protect his delicate sinuses. Judging from how he kept wiping the snotlike substance under his nostrils, it wasn't helping him much.

All it really did was throw an effing monkey wrench—and a dozen extra monkey tools, as far as I was concerned—into my analysis.

My eyes went back to the red and black toothpick in McClatchy's teeth. It had been crafted to look like a miniature lacquered chopstick from Chang's Mandarin Five-Star. So the man liked Chinese food. I turned back to the corpse and did my best to sound casual as I spoke.

"This your first time close to a corpse, McClatchy?" I asked.

"Unless you count the ones in the morgue," he replied. I nodded

to myself. That meant he'd only been exposed to the chilled, scent-reduced versions of dead humans.

"It's something that takes time to get used to. I still run into things I never expect to see," I continued. "For example, this one guy we found in the desert near Bakersfield. His intestines had dried up and shrank, like those crispy noodles some Asian places put out on the table for you to munch on."

"Um," McClatchy said. His face took on a distinctly greenish cast.

"Then there was this one time I came across a fresh corpse, a gang-banger who'd been gut-shot. So his stomach's been ruptured, and the yellow of the stomach acid and the red of the blood all ended up mixed together. Just like the yin and yang symbol they do at some restaurants. You know, when they put the yellow hot mustard and the red sweet n' sour sauce in a dish and make that little swirl for dipping your chicken egg rolls?"

McClatchy didn't respond. He dry-heaved, held his index finger to his lips, and abruptly walked off. Esteban shook his head.

"Remind me never to piss you off, Dayna."

I still couldn't get the damned menthol smell out of my nasal passages, though. That kind of scent bound itself to the soft tissues of the sinus like eucalyptus-scented superglue. The only cure was time.

Finally, I probed the meaty pink pit of the chest wound. My forceps hit something deep within the chest wound with a *clink*. I felt around under the layer of blood with the prongs. Whatever it was felt hard and flat. With a little fishing, I pulled it out into the light of day.

I held up a golden medallion the size and shape of a Sacagawea dollar coin.

It gleamed like a polished yellow button. Esteban let out a low whistle. The medallion bore the picture of a crown and a series of grooved letters.

"I'm going to need another bag," I said, abruptly dry-mouthed.

The reflection of the bright sunlight off the metal made it hard to make out the marks, and it didn't help that they were streaked with sticky, rank fluids from the corpse. I could tell that whatever language it was written in, it wasn't English. Latin, maybe? I pivoted slightly on

my heels so that the coin wouldn't reflect the sun into my eyes.

That's all that saved my life that day. Blind luck.

I heard the *CRACK!* of a rifle shot.

The brim of my baseball cap exploded into feathery chunks of cheap cloth fiber. I stared stupidly at the floating blue and white shreds as my mind tried to get the switching gear working again.

Someone was shooting at us!

"Get down!" I heard Esteban scream. "Dammit, Dayna, get down!"

A second *CRACK!* and something bright and deadly buzzed past my ear.

Correction. Someone was shooting at *me!*

Finally, my brain completed its de-icing procedure. I moved, trying to dive to my right and get as flat as humanly possible. I heard people screaming, the shouts of the cops all around us.

My side crumpled in pain and everything went dim.

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Chapter Three

My side burned where I hit the ground.

I fought for breath. Coughed and got a mouthful of sour concrete dust for my trouble. The scent of male sweat and sport deodorant blotted out John Doe's stench. My left eye pressed up so close to Esteban's silver badge that I could only make out half of his name.

I heard him shouting orders. The crackle of gunfire. More shouts, curses.

I squirmed, and the detective let me up from where he'd thrown his body across mine. I coughed again, then turned to the side and spat out the mouthful of dust. Esteban looked at me, his boyish face a mixture of pride and embarrassment, *a sort of ohmigod-I can't-believe-what-I-just-did!* kind of look.

I probably owed him my life about then. But his expression just sort of busted me up inside, made me say the first thing that popped into my head.

"So," I said, "was it good for you?"

Esteban actually blushed.

He got to his feet, extended a hand, and helped me up. His palm was warm, smooth, and strong. I squeezed it in appreciation.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I mean to say…thank you. For doing…that."

"*De nada*, Dayna."

McClatchy pounded back up the rise and came to a stop before us. "Either of you hurt?" I shook my head. Esteban followed suit. "Dammit! Now I'm going to have to detail even more of my manpower."

Nice to see that even a professional bureaucrat cared. *Thanks, jerkweed.*

"Love you too, Bob," was what came out of my mouth.

* * *

The extra security proved a pain in the neck.

I refused to leave the crime scene until they'd lifted some prints and bagged the corpse. McClatchy practically had me clapped in irons and shanghaied back to the Medical Examiner's office in the company of two beat cops who looked like they'd been kicked off the Chicago Bears for steroid abuse.

The bagging people unceremoniously dumped the John Doe on an examination table without so much as a thank-you-ma'am. I swabbed the surfaces of the metal chunk I'd taken out of the body's shoulder, the gold medallion, and the inside of that odd chest wound and sent the samples off to the tox-box experts.

Then I sent samples of Doe's clothing to the fiber experts, sterilized the medallion, stuck it in my pocket, dumped the jumpsuit, left a note for Hector to email me his crime scene photos, pulled the camera's memory card, and had just started prepping for Doe's autopsy when something went *sproing*, and all the adrenaline I'd been running on petered out as I called it a day.

The two guys from the Bears' defensive line escorted me home and parked across the street from my house. I thanked them and walked up the freshly paved asphalt driveway to my house, which was a Santa Fe-themed shoebox with a lawn that looked more like a well-tended sand dune.

I stumbled my way inside and began pulling down all of the blinds. Security or no, I didn't like the idea of anyone watching me in my own home. I left only one window alone—the backyard view that ran right up to the edge of the park

I'd paid a third more for my place than I should've but I wanted the view. My house backed up to the open, brush-covered slope of Griffith Park. Perched at the top of the ridge was the Art Deco dome of Griffith Observatory.

My fingers began to shake, so I undressed and quickly stepped into the shower. I turned the water to *hot* and scrubbed myself down with a pair of exfoliating gloves until my skin turned bright pink. Then I slipped a bathrobe on and padded over to the kitchen freezer.

I grabbed the pint-size container of my favorite ice cream—a milkfat-laced smart bomb of a dessert called Chunky Chocolate Coma. Then I curled up in a corner of couch and proceeded to do the windmill thing with my spoon until I scraped the bottom of the carton.

My fingers began to quiver again. I flung the empty container and the spoon away with a clatter. They bounced off the wall and left me a pair of chocolate streaks to clean up later.

I felt a chest-tingling cry finally break loose inside like an iceberg calving off from a glacier. I buried my face in my hands and just sobbed, sobbed with relief that I was alive—*alive,* dammit!—and that I was going to see another sunrise.

It felt heavenly. It felt as if a rubber band had snapped inside of me.

I'd always been so damned good at holding everything back. Everything that would've marked Miss Dayna Chrissie as someone who just wasn't professional enough to be in forensics. Someone who couldn't control their emotions, who couldn't stay detached, who couldn't be trusted to run an investigation.

But I'd held it together today. Even had to remind myself to thank the guy who'd put himself in harm's way to keep me safe.

It made me feel good.

So good, it almost made me forget that someone had tried to kill me.

Almost.

I didn't make it to bed. I stayed curled up on the couch like a lanky, black-haired, green-eyed cat. A cat that someone had stuffed with ice cream and then wrapped in an oversize bathrobe, to be precise. I watched the evening turn into night.

The city had lit up the road to the observatory tonight. I could imagine James Dean gunning his motorcycle up the steep asphalt slope and up to the tinted spotlights that gave the observatory dome the gentle amber shade of a Malibu sunset.

My drowsy brain settled on the round spotlights. Then the lights changed, became darker and more ragged at the edges as I felt my

eyelids grow as heavy as marble slabs. I thought of the crime scene today. The drops of red at the scene near the body.

Splashes of blood on concrete.

My eyes closed and the vision of the dusty gray concrete softened and turned white. It was a frigid December in the woods of Pike County, Illinois.

I'd just turned seven.

The blood trail stood out as scarlet splashes against the snow. Cold wind bit at me with wolves' teeth and made a low-pitched howl through icicle-coated branches. It raised goosebumps on my arms through the fleece of my ballet-slipper pink jacket and mittens. The bare trunks of the birch and hickory trees around me jutted out of the snow like picked-over bones.

I wasn't scared. If I squinted through the withered remains of the underbrush, I could still make out the glow of the Christmas lights that rambled along our front porch. The scent of a wood fire billowed out of the chimney and skimmed past my nose like a passing phantom.

Curious, I decided to follow the blood trail.

The line of droplets meandered drunkenly between the trees. My little wigwam boots sank into the snow's icy surface with the crunch of someone biting into stale crusts of bread. Once, the droplets became a *splatter*. Off to the left, at the level of my head, was a bright gash against the papery-thin bark of a sugar maple tree. Then the trail of blood drops changed direction.

Now it headed towards the house.

I walked faster as I saw the blood trail run up along the side of our driveway, past where Daddy's beat-up station wagon sat like a wood-paneled display of dents ringed with rust. I followed the trail up to the garage's side door. It was wide, built to swallow furniture and auto parts and maybe little girls.

Lime-green flecks of paint clung to the door's wooden surface by faith as much as anything else. The blood pointed the way. Inside.

My breath echoed hollow and empty in the recesses of my hood. The noises from inside the garage were soft but unmistakably clear. The scrape of flesh on concrete. A *grunt*, as if someone was lifting a

heavy object, something falling with a *thud* against metal.

Then the blubbery, snot-choked sounds of sobbing.

I grasped the doorknob, turned it, pushed in.

The all-weather bulb inside the garage hung from the rafters by a single paint-spattered cord. Daddy's orange hunting vest was streaked with red. An iron smell rolled off him and filled the room. His rifle lay propped up against the wall.

Something that looked like a grayish-white nub of bone jutted out of the darkness of the garage chest freezer. Daddy knelt before the white, coffin-shaped chamber, shaking his head as he cried. A single tear hit the side of the freezer and slithered down chilly metal.

"Oh, God, forgive me, forgive me," Daddy sobbed. He clasped his hands together clumsily, trying to pray.

I stepped forward into the garage. Daddy hadn't noticed me yet, he was still talking to God. Now I was worried. What could be causing him such pain?

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I killed her. Dear God, I *murdered* her."

Whatever Daddy was concerned about, it had to do with whatever was in the chest freezer. The lid lay open, but the lip of the freezer was high up for my seven-year old frame. I stood on tiptoe, grabbed the top edge, and gazed down into the Kelvinator's depths.

My eyes went wide at what lay at the bottom.

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Chapter Four

I woke with a start. The gray light of dawn came streaming through the window. No fog on the horizon. That meant it was going to be hot enough to do a sidewalk pizza bake in downtown Los Angeles.

Still, I set my coffeemaker to brew up a steaming pot of caffeine as I went to dig in my closet. I came up with a not-too-badly ironed pair of Ann Taylor pants, a violet top, and some shoes in a color that wouldn't clash. Then I added my favorite long-sleeved open cardigan. It was going to be a scorcher today, but I planned to work inside.

Winter lives in the morgue.

I poured myself a cup of Colombia's finest and took a sip. That's when my mind did that weird *clicking* thing again, like it was a spongy telephone switchboard that took its own sweet time connecting things together.

For some reason, my brain dredged up memories of my college roommate. She'd had several weird hobbies, but her favorite one involved dressing up for some medieval historical society. She hung out with the folks who ran the Renaissance Faires off the college campus.

It wasn't exactly my kind of crowd—give me modern dental care and indoor plumbing any day over Ye Olde Middle Ages—but I did enjoy the few times I went to their events. Jousting, carousing, medieval swordplay done by the men to impress the women. While I got a lot of attention from the guys, I lost interest. I think that happened around the time when I realized it was against the rules to get men to fight to the death for my favor.

But here's the deal: the makeshift knights didn't go in for the museum-piece plate armor suits. They went for body-length chain mail, or vests and a kind of metal skirt. Mail was cheaper, easier to move in, breathed, and since it was just clothing made up of little metal rings, it was lighter as well.

I was willing to bet a year's salary that at the time of his death, John Doe had been *wearing chain mail*.

Okay, but did that get me anywhere? Again, it looked like I just replaced one mystery with another. I paced the length of the kitchen and stuck my hands in my pockets. Something cold tingled against my index finger.

I pulled John Doe's damned gold medallion out of my pocket.

My mind whirled back through yesterday's events.

Okay, I sent samples of Doe's clothing to the fiber experts, dumped the sweaty jumpsuit, sterilized the medallion, stuck it in my pocket…

Oh my God! What the hell was I doing? I'd just tampered with—I'd just stolen evidence from a murder case! I'd robbed a corpse!

Breathing hard, I pulled open a kitchen drawer with one hand. With the other, I moved to put the medallion in the drawer.

The hand holding the medallion put the damned thing back in my pocket.

I blinked. I took the medallion out, tried to put the thing away, and a second time, into my pocket it went. The little hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention as if someone had just run their nails over a chalkboard.

Okay, now this was getting spooky.

I took the medallion out and examined it again. To be perfectly honest, I don't think I'd have blinked if I'd seen the phrase *One Ring to rule them all, and in the darkness bind them* stenciled on one side.

Instead, clear imprint of a horse's hoof dominated one face of the medallion. The strange lettering on the other looked like a cross between Latin letters and Nordic runes. My arms goose-pimpled as I considered what was going on here.

One, I could be losing it.

Two, something effing strange was going on.

I didn't believe in voodoo or witchcraft or Wicca or any dopey new-age version of an Earth-Mother. Hell, I didn't even go to church on Sunday to partake in any of the local religious denominations on order.

I went out the front door in a rush. Of course, I'd completely forgotten that Deputy Chief McClatchy had put me under surveillance for my own safety. I badly startled the half-asleep pair of cops that had taken over for the Bears' linebackers. I gave them an apologetic wave as I hopped into my car.

I drove to the M.E.'s office at the sizzling Southern California highway speed of twenty miles per hour in bumper to bumper traffic. I didn't mind this time. It let me think more on the medallion. I could feel the cold lump of metal in my pocket. Tugging at me like it had its own gravity field.

John Doe didn't get shot with this little golden marker. So how did it get into his chest wound? The answer was obvious, and it almost made me miss the highway off-ramp to the Medical Examiner's headquarters.

It got into his chest wound because someone *planted* it there.

Fair enough. Why would someone do that? Knowing even the basics of forensic examinations meant that whoever put the thing in the most obvious wound expected it to be found. In other words, someone planted it there for a single reason.

Whoever it is *wanted* me to find it.

With that happy thought dancing in my head, I pulled in and parked in my assigned garage slot. My police escort parked nearby, in a spot where they could watch the entrance.

The Office of the Medical Examiner was a long, low-slung trapezoid of smoky black glass and long corridors lined with gray carpet. Compared to the 'well-tended junkyard' look of a lot of labs I'd worked for, the high-tech look of the place was a welcome change.

I clipped my badge identity card to my belt, pushed through the lobby's king-sized revolving glass door, went through the security checkpoint's metal detector, and then set off down the long gray-shaded corridor for my office at a pace just under a run.

"Dayna!" a familiar voice called, "Wait up!"

A matronly woman with a frizz of hair the color of weak tea and pince-nez glasses that would've warned a librarian to keep quiet half-walked, half-ran to catch up with me.

“I’m sorry, Shelly,” I said, as she puffed her way over to my side. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Figured that as soon as I saw you break the new land-speed record through the door. Any faster, and you’d set the carpet on fire,” she said. Her soft Texas drawl spun out her last word into ‘fahr’.

Shelly Richardson and I had started out together as junior medical examiners. I’d swapped the M.E.’s green gown to move over to Crime Scene Analysis, but Shelly had stayed and prospered over the last couple of years. Like me, she loved pulling the bizarre and puzzling cases, that could make you stay up late chewing on your split ends in frustration.

“Maybe if I keep moving,” I said, “I’ll make a more difficult target.”

She made a disapproving *tsk*. We were friends, but she didn’t always appreciate my dark sense of humor. Shelly’s tastes ran more to sitcom reruns or comic strips involving cats who hated Mondays and loved lasagna.

“News spreads quick. Someone gunning for you? Or was it just some punk who up-n-decided to take a couple pot-shots at the cops?”

“It sure seemed like someone was aiming for me,” I said, as we started walking again. “But I can’t think of anyone who’d want me dead.”

“No jealous ex-lovers? Boyfriends?”

I sighed and shook my head ‘no’. It’d been a while since I’d been out with a man on an honest-to-goodness real live date, but that didn’t stop Shelly from trying to get me married off.

“Nobody’s’ been kind enough to leave me so much as a threatening voicemail,” I said. “Speaking of threatening voicemails, I haven’t heard from McClatchy about an arrest, either.”

“There wasn’t one. I asked Esteban. They swarmed the building the shots were fired from. The boys are swearing on the Good Book that nobody could’ve slipped past, but all they found on the roof were four spent rifle casings.”

“More good news,” I grumbled. “Well, I mostly came to see what’s up with the John Doe we picked up downtown.”

"Oh, Connor MacLeod? I worked it with the tox-box folks last night. Hector sent me his photos, too."

"*Connor MacLeod?* We actually got a hit on that goofball name?"

Shelly rolled her eyes. "That's 'MacLeod' as in *Highlander*, dear. We're calling him that 'cause of that little metal fragment you gave us."

"You're kidding me!" I exclaimed, as we reached the glorified broom closet they'd repurposed as my office.

"Read the reports for yourself. You'll find it right peculiar, I think."

I turned the worn brass doorknob and pushed my way inside. Dusty teak bookshelves fairly groaned under the textbooks that took up the bulk of two walls, while the window on the remaining one looked out over the grassy expanse of the building's rear lawn. The mess of paper on my desk was bad enough so that a hamster would've considered the place in prime move-in condition. But I kept a spot on the front left corner for a bright red cookie jar that I always kept stuffed with fresh brown-sugar ginger snaps. The picture on the front of the jar came from one of my favorite Disney flicks. It showed the Mad Hatter and White Rabbit at a tea party, holding up a wooden sign that proclaimed: *Have One!*

I slid into my office chair with a creak of dry springs and opened the first of the folders that lay atop the pile of paper I'd been meaning to properly organize someday. Shelly took the visitor's chair, lifted the top of my jar, and grabbed one of the cookies. I suppressed a grin. I didn't actually like ginger snaps that much, but their sweet-spicy scent gave me a nice tingle in the nostrils. Not coincidentally, it also told me who'd been visiting my office on any given day.

The reports were terse but clearly laid out. No immediate hits on the fingerprints, but the FBI was checking their database as well. 'Connor' had been in excellent health before his death, about six hours before we'd found him. Clean living, too. Zero hits for drugs from cocaine, heroin, aspirin, or even aspartame in his body fluids, stomach contents, hair follicles, and subcutaneous fat.

Findings like that are unusual. But Hector Reyes' photos moved

the case from unusual to head-scratching. He hadn't found any shoe prints at all. But he'd seen the same curious thing that I had—multiple blood trails leading to the body. He'd systematically put together a montage of pictures from 360 degrees around the body and then spliced it into a combined image. The blood trails radiated out from the body in a perfectly symmetrical pattern.

There were no traces of someone dragging or carrying a body across the jumbled terrain of broken concrete to leave him in the middle of the lot. None. That had to be wrong. Connor would've been more than two hundred pounds of dead weight. Hard for even a bodybuilder to handle. But Hector's photos showed that we weren't looking at blood trails. We were looking at a splatter pattern.

It was as if someone had simply dumped poor, dead Connor from a platform ten feet in the air, let him fall straight down, and then vanished. Taking the platform with them as well, I might add.

Effing im-poss-i-ble.

And then the report got *really* interesting.

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Chapter Five

My office chair squeaked in protest as I leaned forward. Shelly looked up expectantly as she popped the last of the ginger snap in her mouth with a spicy-smelling *crunch*. I closed the report she'd done on the metal fragment.

"Are you serious about what you found?" I asked.

"As serious as a Baptist in church, hon."

The metal chip from the massive shoulder wound was a piece of medium-grade iron called 'blister steel'. But the tox guys had run the metal's impurities against hundreds of possible metal implements. Their conclusion: Connor had been wounded by a genuine antique. The steel shard came from a sword that could only have been manufactured during Europe's High Middle Ages.

"Okay," I acknowledged, "at least I'm getting the *Highlander* joke now, sort of. So our guy got attacked by a nut with a medieval sword. Any recent thefts from museums, private collections?"

"Nope." Shelly leaned back in her chair to give the hallway a long look in both directions. When she was sure it was clear, she continued. "Let's head on over to the slab, take a gander at Mister MacLeod. We need to talk. Private-like."

I started to ask a question. Then shut my mouth with a snap. I'd only seen Shelly get serious about stuff like this once or twice, and when she said 'we need to talk', she meant business.

We walked down to the chiller rooms, where we actually kept the bodies. The cold chambers were windowless rooms coated with cheery yellow-brick tiles that looked like they belonged in Oz, not a morgue. The light came from a combination of harsh fluorescent bulbs and a special kind of skylight that bounced the sun down to us indirectly from a reflection panel on the roof. Different kinds of light helped throw different kinds of dyes or marks into sharper relief for us.

Shelly and I didn't chit-chat as we did the surgical hand-wash routine and gowned up in a matching pair of pale green scrubs. A

couple pieces of paperwork later, we rolled the body out of the cold chamber. The gamy smell of rotting flesh was muted here—the low temperature slowed decomposition—and there was a background scent of formaldehyde that curled up in the nostrils and plastered the back of the throat.

The man I now thought of as Connor—funny, how easily we can attach names, even to dead things—didn't appear to be much worse for wear. Shelly had performed a modified Y-shaped incision for the autopsy. Normally, we started the cut at the top of each shoulder and ran down to the front of the chest, switching over to shears or bone saws when we reached the sternum. Since our boy's sternum had been powdered, the cut continued around the wound and down to the pubic bone. But Shelly didn't pull the flaps back. Instead, she directed me to Connor's hands as she spoke.

"I'm wondering if our friend really *was* attacked by a medieval knight, or someone pretending to be one. Because he might have been into the same game himself." She touched the man's bare left hand with her gloved one, and then looked questioningly at me.

"You're right," I acknowledged, looking at the wound there and above, on his arm. "Classic defensive wounds. Probably against the same weapon that cut his ear, his shoulder."

Shelly nodded. Next, she grasped Connor's right palm and turned it over. The inner side of the thumb, fingers, and the palm itself showed callus buildup.

"Exactly where someone would hold a sword by the handle," I noted. "This ties up with what I've been thinking about. The guy's weird skin pattern comes from wearing chain mail. Maybe this is some kind of dueling club? One that's into, I don't know…medievalism? Live-action role play?"

"If so, they ain't doing it right. You want to know what caused that awful wound on John Doe's chest?"

I nodded. Shelly smiled as she spoke again.

"So would I. The boys in the lab have no clue."

No clue? What the hell blew open this guy's chest?

"I read your notes, Dayna. Your nose is pretty darn good. The lab

backs up your findings of sulfur, potassium nitrate, and wood ash. And get this—the wound was almost completely cauterized. High heat, charring of surface tissues. No way was this done with a conventional firearm."

"No way it could've been…" I mused. My voice trailed off as Shelly's voice dropped a full octave lower and became deadly serious.

"There is one more thing," she said coolly. "It's why I wanted to talk to you in private down here. Detective Esteban said that you found a small artifact on the body. Something made of gold. But you didn't list it on the exhibits turned in to us. Care to fill me in, before department security gets involved?"

I looked at her helplessly and wrung my hands for a moment. I still wasn't sure what was going on with that damned medallion. But Shelly was my friend, my ally. If anyone could help me save my job over this snafu, this bit of black magic, it was her. I drew the medallion out of my pocket and held it up. It glittered warmly in the bright rays that streamed in through the skylight.

Then the medallion did more than glitter.

A delicate ringing filled the air, echoing off the walls of the morgue. It began to get brighter in the room, much brighter. In a few seconds, the medallion blazed with a white-yellow radiance like I was holding a miniature sun in my hand.

"Oh my lord!" Shelly exclaimed. "Dayna, what are you doing? What's going on?"

"I'm not doing this!" I shouted back, but my voice seemed swallowed up by the ringing, by the radiance of the star in my palm. The light wasn't hot, not really, but I could feel pulses of energy coming off the medallion like the heavy swells of an incoming ocean tide. I didn't dare move—I was worried that if I tried to get rid of the medallion, that I'd end up putting it into my pocket, and right now I didn't want the effing thing *anywhere* near my crotch.

I squeezed my eyes to slits, but the brightness penetrated right through my lids. Right then, a horrible, ticklish sensation crawled up and down my skin. I let out a scream that would've done credit to a Hollywood B-movie actress who's found herself in a horror movie.

One with a scene where she gets a boatload of spiders dumped on her.

And then it was as if the floor itself melted away under me. Like it turned into a bottomless void of white light. I fell into the void as I continued to scream, tumbling end over end into a nothingness that seemed to stretch on forever.

* * *

Laundry taken off the clothesline.

That's the first scent I encountered as I swam back to consciousness.

I lay on something that was feather-soft. A mattress, I guessed. I felt the slick coolness of sheets covering my body. I didn't open my eyes. I remembered falling, that I must've taken a tumble. What's more, I was a week behind on my wash, so the fresh linen smell meant I wasn't in my bed. I listened for the tell-tale electronic beeps and hums of a hospital room. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Someone nearby coughed gently. I froze. A sigh, and then a voice spoke from somewhere above and to my right. The voice sounded deep, chesty, and yet surprisingly gentle.

"Are you awake yet, perchance?"

That got my curiosity going.

Perchance? Did I hit my head and end up in a Jane Austin three-act play? I half-expected to see a brooding, darkly handsome Byronic man with wild locks of hair and a stylish nineteenth-century jacket.

I opened my eyes.

I lay under a set of satin sheets the color of fresh cream. The sheets were neatly tucked into the sides of a four-poster bed. The room was an elegantly done up affair, with a vaulted ceiling, eggshell-white stone floor, and a pair of ornately carved wooden tables that squatted on either side of the bed. Tapestries made of brightly colored fabrics done up in whorls and stripes draped each of the walls, save the one closest to my bed. Instead, a triple set of bay windows let in bright wedges of sunlight. The edges of the windows, like the furniture and the tips of the four bed posters were marked with gilded

fleur-de-lis accents.

Let's just say that Louis XIV would've found it homey.

The man standing next to my bed—looming over it, to be precise—was a brooding, darkly handsome Byronic man with wild locks of hair. He wore a stylish cloth jacket the color of sangria wine, punctuated with bell-shaped silver buttons.

That was from the waist up. From the waist down, he had the body of a well-built chestnut draft horse.

I squeezed my eyes shut again.

"Whoever you are, you're not going to believe this," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking, "but I think I must've hit my head. Like, bad."

"I'm certain that I would believe you," the man said.

Man? Or would that be 'stallion'? No, a centaur? A centaur stallion?

"I somehow doubt that."

"Relinquish your doubts," he said. "My name is Galen, of the House of Friesain. I was tasked with summoning you."

"Yes, you certainly did a good job, I am most definitely summoned."

I cautiously opened my eyes. Yup, Galen still looked like a centaur.

My gaze flicked down low. Very low. Not ladylike, I know, but see where you look the next time *you* wake up with a centaur standing next to your bed.

Whoo. Galen really *was* a stallion.

"I swear," I said, as I sat up and rubbed my eyes with my knuckles, "Galen, if I find out that someone laced one of my ginger snaps with lysergic acid, I won't rest until I've hunted them down and…I don't know, keyed their car, shaved their cat. This is really wild."

"Surely you'd think so," Galen said agreeably, "but you're not under the influence of any substance, fair or foul. This is reality. One should accept it."

I looked down at myself. Someone had thoughtfully removed my

scrubs, but I still had on the violet top and open cardigan I'd started the day wearing. That probably convinced me more than anything else that I wasn't tripping on acid or having any sort of nervous breakdown.

To triple-check that I wasn't dreaming, I pinched myself on my arm. Hard. Yeah, it hurt. I blinked again, shuddered, and then rubbed my arms as I looked at the rest of Galen, House of Freeze-Sane a little more closely.

His equine body and tail matched the dark brown color of the hair on his human head. Muscles bulged under the skin of the horse body like bunches of the kind of rope they use to keep ocean liners tied firmly to the dock. Interestingly, all four of his legs were fringed with long, silky black hair below what I think they called the 'knee' on a horse.

"Okay," I said cautiously, "I've really got no choice but to accept what I'm seeing here. I'm…well, I'm sure as hell not in Kansas anymore, I guess."

I threw the covers back and got shakily to my feet. Galen reached out to steady my shoulder, and I accepted his help. I placed my hand on his for a moment. His skin felt warm, dry, and completely human. Though the clip-clop sound of his hoofs on the stone floor as he took a step back was utterly alien. It was a real mind-bender.

"No, you are not in 'Kan Sass' anymore, Dayna Chrissie," Galen said with a smile. He gestured towards the windows at the far end of the room. "You've been summoned to Good King Benedict's palace, the capitol of the land of Andeluvia. For the moment, you're the honored guest of Grand Duke Kajari."

For the moment. I pushed that thought aside and asked the more pressing questions on my mind.

"How'd you know my name, Galen?"

He shrugged. "It was printed on the badge hanging at your belt."

I sighed. "Okay. So, how did you bring me here?"

"I set a pair of enchantments on a medallion of King Benedict's reign," Galen replied. "One was to bring you here, to our world. The other was a *geis*, what we call a 'spell of obligation'. To ensure that the

medallion wasn't lost."

"Yeah, about that," I said wryly. I fished the damned thing out of my pocket and held it up in my palm. "Can you, I dunno, revoke that? I don't want to have to carry this thing around like pocket change for the rest of my life."

"Certainly." Galen covered my hand with his. He spoke a word or two of some guttural, Nordic-sounding tongue. I felt a tingle in my palm, and then I felt the strangest sensation yet. A 'snap' like a cord of filament line around my wrist had just been cut. "There, now you should be able to throw the medallion away."

I cocked my arm as if I was about to fling the little golden disk away—and then I curved my arm so that I stuck the medallion back into my pocket. Galen started. His nostrils flared and he flicked his curly chestnut tail. I pulled the coin back out and tossed it to him.

"Just kidding," I said. Galen stared at me for a second before breaking into a grin. I returned it. "So, you're the magic guy here, are you?"

"I'm the Wizard for the court of Andeluvia, yes."

"Well, then I suppose that you were 'tasked' to bring me here. Care to fill me in on what King Benedict had in mind?"

"That would be quite difficult," Galen said, and his face took on the brooding aspect that I'd expected to see from someone who could've stepped off the set of *Fantasia* and into the world of *Wuthering Heights*. "You see, that goes to the heart of why you've been summoned."

"Oh?" I didn't like where this was going.

"You see, Good King Benedict's been slain."

"Slain. Ah."

"Yes. He met his end two days ago." Galen gestured with a sweep of one mighty arm. "It's imperative that we unravel the mystery and expose whoever murdered him."

"Imperative?"

"Oh, yes!" He stomped one of his black forehooves in emphasis against the stone floor with a loud *clack*. "Why else would we need the services of a crime scene analyst?"

It figures. No one ever invites me anywhere for the sparkling conversation.

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Chapter Six

The doors throughout Benedict's palace were made of a light-colored wood bound with iron bands. They were each topped by a narrowly pointed arch, set high enough to let my centaur companion through without bending his head. According to Galen, that was a courtesy, a sign of tolerance and respect between Benedict's realm and the centaurs.

Galen led the way through the palace halls with a high-stepping trot. I wasn't sure whether that was due to nerves, his own personal type of locomotion, or simply to enable a slow-footed human to keep up. While on the move, he gave me a Cliffs Notes version of recent Andeluvian history.

The land of Andeluvia was split between Benedict's (mostly) human kingdom and that of the Centaur Realm. Thanks to Benedict's efforts, peace had reigned for the last twenty years, everybody had prospered, and in general everyone seemed to like the old guy.

'Seemed' being the operative word.

Two days ago, while Benedict met with a group of centaur nobles, he'd ended up dead as a doornail. The chief suspects were the centaurs, of course. They'd fled the scene as the crime was discovered. That didn't exactly help their claim that they were innocent, but the centaur nobles were sticking to their story.

"That's where we hope you can help us," Galen said, as we came up to a set of doors that were far grander than anything we'd passed yet. He bent slightly to grab the massive iron handle and pulled the door open. He indicated that I should enter with a wave of his hand.

I walked into a long, narrow, rather drafty room that resembled the bedroom in that it had the same vaulted ceiling, wall tapestries, and deep-set windows at the far end. However, a table made of dark wood, gilded at the edges with gold leaf, stretched the length of the room. Place settings and high-backed chairs inlaid with fleur-de-lis designs marked regular intervals along the table. At each chair sat a

man or woman, with fair to blonde hair, brown or gray eyes, and generally florid, bony facial features. Each of the people present was decked out in fur and velvet-trimmed cloaks, jackets, and hats. They were talking—actually arguing—so loudly that no one seemed to notice my entrance.

Which was fine by me. Compared to these folks, who were all clothed in the medieval equivalent of *haute couture*, I looked sadly underdressed. I probably would've turned to slink back out had Galen not come trotting through the door. At the sound of his hooves, everyone's conversation ground to a halt. Eyes swiveled in our direction.

If looks could kill, I'd have been a little mound of minced chuck and Galen a slightly larger pile of ground horsemeat.

"Good people of the court of Duke Kajari," he said, in his deep voice. "May I present Lady Dayna Chrissie, of the Office of Medical Examiner, from the land of Los Angeles."

I cringed a little. The introduction seemed a little over the top for me. But if I was expecting a pleasant, courtly greeting, I was immediately underwhelmed.

No one clapped.

All they did for a moment was stare at me with suspicious, slitted eyes.

"I can't believe it," said one of the nobles, from halfway down the length of the table. The man's elegant, fur-trimmed jacket barely sufficed to cover the expanse of his ample belly. "So the horse-faced Wizard-for-hire has located and brought back someone to 'help'. A witch from another world. Please, spare us."

"Watch your language," the thin, hawk-nosed woman next to him added, "I've hired many a witch before. Unlike this one, they were actually useful."

A man with a neatly trimmed goatee and black leather armor openly sneered at me. "What need do we have for this woman's services? I mean, unless it's wenching and sporting that she is good at. She might be of use if she can move like a mink in heat."

The people around the table roared with laughter at that one.

Me, I was doing my best to count to ten and stay in my happy place.

“This is blasphemous!” cried an older, grandfatherly figure, “We soothsayers will not stand by and watch ourselves be mocked by this outlander!” He held up a wooden walking staff and moved it menacingly. He wore a stained white jacket over a tunic made up of some kind of dark blue fur. To my eye, it made the old guy look like he’d gone out and skinned Cookie Monster from Sesame Street.

“That is enough, good people, enough,” said the man sitting at the head of the table. He rose, and the crowd quieted. His head, cleanly shaved save for an espresso-colored scalp lock at the back, gleamed like polished wood in the soft light that streamed in from the window. “You have done well, Sir Galen. You have followed my orders perfectly. As I had wished.”

An angry murmur ran through the crowd at that. Galen simply bowed his head in respect. “I am here to serve both our peoples, Duke Kajari.”

The Duke leaned forward and placed his hands on the table. The very shape of his face looked commanding, from the angular cheek and jaw bones to the aristocratic slope of his aquiline nose. His scarlet-colored coat sported little bell-shaped buttons similar to the ones on Galen’s jacket, only trimmed in buttery gold. He wore no crown, but a satin mantle the color of ripe plums draped over his broad shoulders like a royal sash. Kajari’s voice wasn’t as deep as Galen’s basso rumble. But it made up for that with a smooth husk that compelled one to pay attention to what was being said.

“As Lord Regent, I implore you all to assist in this matter.” He pointed out the richly dressed man and hawk-nosed woman. “That includes the both of you, Lord and Lady Behnaz.” He nodded at the man with the goatee. “Captain Vazura, you must stand ready should this woman call.” He frowned as he glanced at the old man with the staff. “Master Seer Zenos, be so kind as to speak to your guild. We hold them in the utmost respect.”

“Utmost respect! I think not!” The old man turned on his heel and stamped out the door, pausing only to give me a look calculated to

burn a hole in a wooden plank. This was followed by the squeak and groan of chairs on the stone floor as one by one, each of the people sitting at the table got up, usually offering a couple choice curse words, and filed by me and Galen.

I counted four disdainful sniffs, three murmured words of insult, and a whole brace of noses out of joint. My knuckles were white by the end of this little ritual, but I maintained my temper. Duke Kajari, perhaps bored by sitting at the end of the table by himself, came over towards me, an uncertain smile on his face.

"My sincere apologies, Lady Chrissie," he said.

The warmth in his voice melted a nice chunk of the ice that'd built up inside me over the last minute. "You come among us at a hard time. A fearful time. War has been declared between Benedict's realm and that of the Centaur Realm. Hospitality is in short supply. Harsh words are not."

"Oh, no matter," I said, though my voice fluttered in the back of my throat. "I understand, um…Sire."

Kajari smiled wider this time. He had even, white teeth that could've headlined a Hollywood billboard. And the man had marvelous blue eyes. Bright blue, bombardier blue. The kind of eyes I could dive into and paddle around in sans swimsuit.

"You are not familiar with our customs yet, Lady. 'Sire' is only appropriate when addressing our King." He indicated himself with a tap on his chest. "I am only the Lord Regent, until Benedict's son can be recalled from abroad."

"Either way, it sounds like your subjects are restless."

He nodded wearily, and motioned for Galen and myself to follow him. We walked down another corridor, this one lined with trumpet-shaped metal torches and guards dressed in red and black livery draped over the glint of mailed armor.

"Restless and afraid. You see, when Benedict was murdered, half of the realm's nobles saw their estates going up in the flames of war." He shrugged eloquently. "As for the other half, like Vazura or Behnaz…they see opportunity. To conquer new lands in the Centaur Realm."

Galen made a surprisingly horse-like snort. “As if they could!”

“I hear you, Wizard. Your people are fierce warriors. But so are the soldiers in the Andeluvian army. Both sides are eager for blood.”

I *really* didn’t like where this conversation was headed.

“Let me show you what is in the offing,” Kajari finished.

We passed through another set of double doors, and before I knew it, we were outside. I gasped as the calm, draft-free corridor gave way to a howling, rushing wind. We stood atop the palace battlements, gazing out over a wide swath of land, laid out far below in a green and gold swale.

Benedict’s palace was an ornate, sprawling building anchored at each corner with a dunce-cap tower. It sat atop what must have been a fair sized hill. Stretching away before us were the gray stone buildings of a nice-sized town. As soon as the slope lessened, the stone buildings gave way to wooden houses. Level ground turned into well-tended farmland and orchards. In the middle distance, the farmland turned into forest, spitted through with dirt roads. And a little further beyond that, the land reared up into a broad, bare plateau. Dust trails boiled up from the plateau’s flat surface. Kajari pulled out a little glass circlet from his chest pocket and handed it to me.

“This will enlarge the images out there,” he said. He turned to Galen, a grave look upon his face. “They seem pretty active today, Wizard.”

“Sadly, I must agree, Lord Regent.”

I squinted through the glass. All of a sudden, what I was seeing leapt into focus. I was watching fully armored centaur knights, their human and equine portions draped with golden mailed armor. They each carried long, steel-tipped lances and triangular shields. As I watched, a group of fifty centaurs broke away from the group, fell back into a gleaming line, and ran through a combination charge and wheel to the left. I blinked, astounded.

I’d just seen a combination infantry maneuver and cavalry charge, all in one.

“Impressive,” I said.

“Very much so.” Kajari said. “They plan to strike Andeluvia’s

border in the next three days. Whoever wins, a lot of people will die."

"Thousands," agreed Galen.

"So…" I ventured, "If I can solve who killed Benedict, then things will go back to normal?"

"That is our hope." Duke Kajari said. "If the matter can be settled, the Andeluvian nobles will lift the war decree. Otherwise, they'll stand firm to do battle."

"And the nobles of the Centaur Realm will never back down from a fight," Galen added. "Nor will they tolerate an insult, for their blood runs hot."

"What if it turns out that the centaurs *did* kill Benedict?" I asked.

"Then we would have to prove it to the centaurs," Kajari said. "If one of their own people is at fault, then we Andeluvians aren't insulting them. Reparations would be paid. Peacefully."

My brain spun like a tilt-a-whirl between all of these new ideas, new discoveries. I bit my lip. Three days. *Three*.

What if the cause wasn't apparent? What if magic had been used? What if I needed gear from the crime lab? Hell, how was I going to get home in the first place?

And really, what business did I have in this world? Being 'summoned' felt like being politely kidnapped. I didn't have a stake in anything here, did I?

The Duke watched me as I pondered all of this. He nodded to himself. When he spoke, his rich voice sounded full of warm, understanding regret.

"I realize now that we made a mistake. This is no place for someone as beautiful and delicate as you, Lady Chrissie."

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Chapter Seven

I looked up and fixed my gaze on Duke Kajari. The wind picked up, whistling over the battlements of Benedict's castle. Kajari's scalp lock tossed in the breeze like a coffee-colored ribbon.

My voice came out slate-hard.

"What do you mean, 'this is no place for me'?"

Kajari frowned. "I meant no slight on your profession. We've studied your world through the application of magic. We've observed how crimes of passion and murder are solved. It was on the advice of the head of Benedict's Parliament that I agreed to bring a crime scene analyst to Andeluvia."

"So you didn't summon me specifically. You'd take any Johnny or Jane-come lately who had the misfortune to pick up your damned gold trinket."

"We knew that only an expert of your kind would probe a body's wounds. Especially if foul play were apparent. Surely you can see how desperate we were for an outsider. Someone who could be objective. But again, I apologize, Lady. Had I known that a woman of such fine character would've been pulled here, I'd have never agreed to Parliament's suggestion–"

I'd had just about enough of the Duke for now.

"You can take my fine character and shove it sideways up your doublet," I said pointedly.

Galen's eyebrows shot up. But he remained silent. His eyes followed the conversation like he would a particularly intense match of tennis.

Kajari blinked and stared at me like I'd slapped him. Hell, in another minute, maybe I'd have done just that. His toe-curling good looks were one thing. But his well-meaning condescension was something I could live without.

He cleared his throat. "Again, you are unfamiliar with our customs."

"Yes, I am. But I think I've got enough 'feminine intuition' to realize that one doesn't speak one's mind to the Lord Regent so bluntly."

"Ah."

I held up a hand and continued before the Duke could right himself. "I'm hardly a shrinking violet. And I'm in this as deep as you are. No one's ever tried to murder me. Until yesterday, when someone tried to put a hole in my skull. And that happened just as I found Galen's medallion."

Kajari's face darkened. "That is too pat for coincidence."

Galen's expression didn't change, but his forehoof tapped a triple beat, either in thought or in nervousness, I wasn't sure. The wind shifted again with a howl. The sharp scent of fresh-cut hay and trimmed grass ghosted by from far below. I absently brushed the silky dark fall of my hair back from my face with the wave of a hand.

"Much too pat. And I don't think it was personal. Whoever shot at me simply didn't want an expert—any expert—examining this case of yours. If I find your killer, I'm betting their blood trail will lead us to whoever tried to put me on an examination table."

Duke Kajari regarded me for a moment longer. It felt as if he were appraising the worth of a fine carriage, a polished gem, or a prize filly. Whatever he saw must have pleased him, for Kajari nodded, as if to himself. A begrudging smile blossomed on his face like a slow-motion flash bulb.

"Forgive me, Lady. Your character is carved from the heart of the wood, as we say here. A rare quality, not to be wasted. Do not be insulted, then, by my last offer. For Galen to send you home, whilst I arrange protection for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I said. "I'm not turning turtle for anyone who thinks they can push me off a case. 'Lady' or not, this is what I *do*."

I let out a breath. It felt like my tongue had been coated in sour grit. I'd had this taste in my mouth before. An after-effect of the flash of anger I'd felt a moment ago. But now, at least Kajari's concern felt like normal, perfunctory politeness. It wasn't cloying like over-heavy

perfume.

Kajari sighed. His expression conveyed what looked like regret.

“You are serious about taking this case on.”

“I’m dead serious.”

His voice went flat. “I hope it shall not come to that.”

“I must agree, and second that prospect,” Galen put in. “Praytell, what is it you wish to do, then?”

“Just what I’d do if I were pursuing this case with the LAPD,” I said, rubbing my palms together. “I need the facts of the case. I need to see the body.”

“Well,” the Duke said, with a toss of his head, “if you’re to work on this, there’s little time to waste. Follow me, if you would. The House of the Hospitalliers is a fair walk from here.”

And with that, he turned on his heel and strode off towards where a set of lichen-encrusted stone stairs descended along the inside of the castle wall. Galen and I had to step lively to catch up. Say this for Duke Kajari, once he made a decision, he knew how to act on it without delay.

Galen threw me a sideways glance as he picked his way down the wide, sloping stairway with loud clops of his hooves.

“Indulge my curiosity, if you would,” the centaur said. “You believe that Benedict’s killer and your assassin are one in the same person?”

“It’s possible. I’m sure that one is connected with the other.”

“And no one’s ever tried to murder you before now?”

“Yes.”

His shaggy brows knotted together in a frown. “If you are correct, then I think you had better get used to it.”

* * *

Here’s something I learned as soon as I followed Duke Kajari into the city streets surrounding the castle: medieval cities smell a good deal like the countryside. That’s not a bad thing in and of itself. Most suburbanites have never smelled anything more pungent than the

Kung Pao chicken at the local mall's food court.

Most of my knowledge about country-type scents comes from a hard-core forensic instructor. She had us go perform animal autopsies in the middle of Chicago's stockyards and slaughterhouses. So the first thing that hits my olfactory sense is livestock feed: the tang of hay and the nutty scent of grain. And following that, sure as night follows day, came the earthy, sunbaked goodness of horse manure. A lot of it.

Nothing truly distressing, probably rating a one-point-five on the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness. Benedict's realm moved a lot of goods via large, squared-off wagons drawn by pairs of horses, so this was as natural a background scent here as exhaust and gasoline would be to an Angeleno. The streets themselves bustled with wagons, pedestrians in blue or tan outfits of leather and linen, and the odd knight-errant in softly gleaming chain mail. Vendors selling everything from freshly cured hides to an onion-y smelling soup touted their wares with a droning chant.

Wherever Duke Kajari went, as soon as the locals spotted the burgundy color of his mantle, the crowds parted in a way that'd have made Moses a little jealous. There wasn't any cheering or kneeling at the Lord Regent's feet, as I'd halfway expected. Rather, people simply went quiet, bowed slightly, or made a nifty sort of half-salute as they cleared space on the gray cobblestones.

As for the centaur wizard and the woman in the weird modern clothes? We didn't rate more than the occasional second glance.

The buildings that lined the street were two-story stone structures with tightly bounded street fronts. On most of the dwellings, a split-level door made of wood bound with iron perched above a high stone step on the left. A window covered with a pane of frosted glass or a thinly stretched animal skin graced the wall to the right. On the whole, the houses reminded me of an upscale version of narrow, rectangular New Orleans 'shotgun' cottages.

We picked our way through a half-dozen or so blocks until we came to a different kind of building. The House of Hospitalliers turned out to be a grander place, with a triple set of wide stone steps and colonnades of marble. The Grecian grandeur of the place only fell

short once one noticed that the marble columns were painted in a barber-shop swirl of sherry red and cream white.

A pair of bored-looking guardsmen snapped to attention as they spotted Kajari approach. He nodded to them absently and we followed him inside. A fussy looking woman in an official-looking cloak delayed us only a moment, as Kajari spoke with her in urgent, hushed tones. The woman glanced at us, her hands knotting a fold of dress and her face full of misgivings. Kajari ignored this and indicated an arched doorway off to one side with the sweep of his hand.

"The Hospitalliers have kept the preservation spells woven tightly about the King," he said gravely. "They are dropping their wards so that you may examine him. We must be quick."

I went through the indicated entrance. For a split second, it felt like I'd pushed through a sticky, dew-coated spider web. My skin flushed and crawled, but I forgot about that as soon as the usual off-putting stench of rotting flesh hit my nose. Royalty or not, everyone rots the same in the end.

Kajari fished a little silk cloth from a pocket and tented it over his nose. Galen muttered something under his breath, but did nothing else. I'll admit, it impressed me. Neither man nor centaur flinched, and no one had pulled out a damned jar of eucalyptus gel.

The doorway opened out into a large square room, the marble walls and floor as bare as the lobby to a particularly grim-looking bank. A raised stone slab and a small wooden table lay at the center like a lonely pair of islands. A skylight from above directed a splash of sun directly onto it.

The stone walls made our steps echo as we approached Good King Benedict. He reclined on a stone slab, a loincloth draped discretely over his waist and legs. His long white hair splayed out like a spray of foam around his pale, calm face. His eyes lay closed under a pair of heavy silver coins. His arms stretched out at his side, and it wasn't until a few moments later that I realized that he was missing his right arm below the elbow.

I didn't miss that detail at first because I was careless. I missed it because the first things that my eyes lit on as I saw the king's body

were a trio of chest wounds. The body back on the slab in Los Angeles had nothing like this. These were wounds that spoke to me in exquisite detail, taken from long hours of experience.

And the first thing they told me?

Someone had shown up in the peaceful medieval kingdom of Andeluvia packing a high-powered rifle.

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Chapter Eight

The afternoon sun streamed through the skylight like a golden lance, throwing harsh shadows along the Good King Benedict's face as he lay on the cold marble slab. His strong nose jutted out from between the two heavy silver coins that lay atop his eyelids—a trick used by undertakers in pre-modern times to keep the corpse's eyes mercifully shut. Speaking of pre-modern times, I doubted that anyone had a digital recorder on them. I turned to Galen and Kajari, who both looked more than a little sad, and yet expectant.

I hoped that neither of them expected me to pull a Sherlock-effing-Holmes out of my nonexistent top hat.

"Do either of you have something to take notes on?" I asked. "Something to record my impressions as I examine the body?"

Galen's lips tightened a little as I said 'the body'.

Yeah, great going Dayna. This is their former ruler, and probably their friend that you're talking about here. But the centaur dug into one of the side pockets on his rust-colored jacket. After a couple seconds of rummaging, he pulled out a small scroll of yellow parchment and a charcoal stylus.

"Perhaps I can help by taking down your observations," he offered.

I nodded in reply and went over to the small table that sat next to Benedict's slab. Two carved wooden bowls and a series of gleaming metal instruments lay arranged neatly on the surface. I frowned a little as I took inventory. There were pieces that made passable forceps, various probes, calipers, and even something that looked like a bite block.

But nothing resembling a cutting tool—no scalpels, dissecting knives, not even a rib retractor. I bit my comments back—what was I expecting, that the House of Hospitalliers would be certified by the AMA?—and looked at the contents of the bowls. A clear fluid that gave off the eye-watering smell of bleach sat in the first. The second

held a pair of crudely fashioned rubber gloves, pinched and worn looking at the fingertips, but serviceable. I slipped them on, swiped my fingers through the disinfectant, and began my initial survey.

"Subject is a Caucasian male, appears to be in his mid-to-late sixties," I began. Behind me, the two men remained silent, but for the scribble of Galen's stylus against the rough sheet of parchment. "I estimate his height at just under six feet, rough weight around two hundred and twenty-five pounds."

"Two correct guesses," Kajari noted. "The Good King passed his sixty-fifth year last winter. He and I were the same height."

"You may have shared the same stature, but you're in different weight categories. Benedict's got good underlying muscle tone, but he's taken on some fat, due in part to age," I replied. I gently manipulated the King's jaw to partially open the mouth, while trying not to jostle the coins. Next, I continued to touch the skin and joints from the shoulder down to the arms, trying my best to get tactile sensations through the gloves. "I'm having trouble pinpointing the time of death through the body mechanics and lividity."

"The preservation wards," Galen reminded me. "I helped craft them myself. Though the Good King has been dead more than two days now, his flesh has resisted the worst corruption."

I cursed under my breath. This world ran on magic. The fact that Benedict had been semi-preserved didn't bother me. Had we found him in Los Angeles, we'd have thrown him into the chiller and gotten similar results. But I worried about whether my own senses could be tricked, or come to the wrong conclusion based on facts that weren't true—due to the intervention of magic.

"Subject's left hand shows callus buildup on the inner side of the thumb, fingers, and the palm," I continued. "Right arm missing below the elbow. Judging by the mass of scar tissue at the stump, this wasn't a birth defect. My guess would be competent but hurried surgery. Battlefield wound?"

"Correct," Kajari said. "Two score years before, at the Oxine River. King Benedict lost his arm to a centaur's blade. Still, his heroism saved the day, allowing Andeluvia to beat back the centaurs."

“Really?” Galen snorted. “When our bards sing of the battle, the centaurs were the ones who stayed their swords, showing the humans the hand of mercy.”

“Each side sees it differently,” Kajari allowed. I continued with my inspection of the body, moving around to the other side of the table, as he went on. “Wizard, let us agree that both sides ‘won’. That battle allowed Benedict to negotiate peace.”

“In that, we are in agreement, my Lord.” Galen said, abashed. “I spoke rashly and out of turn. Truly, Benedict was a great man.”

Of course, that was when Dayna Chrissie, winner of the Miss Sensitivity Challenged Award, chose to ask just the wrong question.

“Can one of you get a cutting tool? I’m going to need something sharp to slice through into the organ cavity.”

The two men stared at me in horror. Galen was the first to speak. His voice sputtered like a struggling steam engine.

“Verily, you wish to…to carve up our monarch and serve him up like a rasher of bacon?” The centaur looked as if he were in pain. “It pains me to no end, to see the Good King in this forlorn state. I for one counted him as a friend.”

Kajari also spoke up, politely but firmly. “I know you are thorough. But the body of our lord must remain whole. At least until his son returns, a week hence. Reconsider.”

I bit back the first response—hell, the first three responses that came to mind. I’d gotten away with sassing the Lord Regent once before, but doing it repeatedly would be testing my luck. And really, would it be worthwhile to push for the full autopsy with the services of a chem or bio lab? It wasn’t like Benedict died of heart failure or had hemlock poured into his afternoon tea.

“All right,” I said, taking a half step back from the body. “I understand. We’ll stop here for the moment.”

“What have you learned about our former lord?”

“I’m guessing that he was quite a scrapper earlier in his life. Later, he enjoyed his mealtimes, his pipe tobacco, and especially red wine.”

Kajari blinked. “I’m impressed. How did you know?”

“Tobacco scent on the lips and in the hair. Wine stains on his

tooth enamel. The abundance of the adipose tissue around his waist. And I've counted sixteen separate scars over the front and sides of his body, none of recent vintage." I put my hands out to circle the trio of wounds in his chest. "But while I know what caused these wounds, the pattern is puzzling me."

"Continue."

"These wounds were made by a class of weapon from my world called a 'firearm'. Guns. Very deadly weapons that can kill at a distance, like arrows."

"We've observed their use in your world," Kajari said grimly. "It is why Benedict restricted us to observation only. Even a single 'fire arm' could have lethal consequences here."

"He was right," I said with a sigh. "I've seen hundreds of the types of wounds made by bullets—the projectile shot by a gun. You learn what kind of damage can be done to the body. And in disturbing detail."

"Will your examination allow you to unveil the King's murderer?" Galen said eagerly.

"I wish I had that kind of magic. What's puzzling me is why one of the bullet holes looks substantially different from the other two." I indicated the topmost wound, which stood out from the pale skin of Benedict's chest just above the sternum. The entry point looked like a tattered red star. "That's one of the cleanest wounds of this type I've ever seen. Compare it to the other entry points."

Galen and Kajari craned their necks to look at the remaining bullet wounds, located right next to each other, about three inches lower and to the left. These holes weren't quite as neat. Just above each entry point lay a tiny bruise-brown crescent. A tiny arc of black spots, almost invisible unless one was looking for them, arched across the skin in the same direction.

"Those black marks are what we call 'stippling'. Think of it as a tattoo. Tiny particles of gunpowder which embed themselves into the skin, when a firearm is discharged at relatively close range. Here, the stippling pattern is very faint. I'm guessing the shot was fired from five, six feet away. Which makes no sense."

“Why is that?” Galen asked.

“These wounds tell me that the bullets which hit Benedict were relatively light, but moving extremely fast. So I’m guessing that this came from a rifle, one similar to the weapon used to shoot at me. But rifles are designed to be used at a distance.” I shook my head. “And you can add one more mystery to the pile. Why do the stippling marks show up only by the lower two wounds and not the top one?”

My mind flashed back to the construction site in Los Angeles. Right at the moment before Esteban had tackled me. I looked at the crescent shape marks on Benedict’s body again and with a *click*, my mind offered up a suggestion.

I reached over to the table and grabbed one of the metal probes. Ignoring the distressed sound that came from one of my companions, I inserted the probe into the topmost bullet wound. I pushed the probe in, slowly following the gory channel cut through the flesh until I heard a sharp *tic*.

I left the probe there, sticking out of the wound ungraciously like a meat skewer. Next, I picked up two more probes. I repeated the insertions, this time on the lower wounds. Each time, I continued until I heard a *tic* sound.

I crouched down at Benedict’s side to get a closer look at the three probes that now pincushioned the poor king’s chest. I gripped the cold, slick edge of Benedict’s slab and did my best to estimate angles off the three probes. The upper one stuck out at a distinctly different angle compared to the lower two.

“Galen, take note,” I said. “Upper probe indicates a downward trajectory of ten degrees. The lower two show an upward trajectory. A sharp one, around forty degrees.”

“…Forty degrees,” Galen repeated quietly, as he wrote down the data.

“Yes,” I said, almost to myself, “that could explain what I’m seeing here.”

“Share your thoughts, then.” This from Kajari.

“I’d be happy to,” I said, as I removed the probes, dipped the gloves in disinfectant, and removed them. “But while we’re on the

way to the crime scene."

"You wish to see the place of the murder? Why, when you have the body here to see?"

"Because sometimes, context is everything," I said, and I walked towards the exit. That same damned skin-crawling sensation rippled over me as I stepped through the doorway. The Wizard and the Duke followed me. "And there's more evidence out there I need to collect."

"Nothing else lay upon the ground to take back from where Benedict fell," Galen said, his hooves clip-clopping on the marble steps. "What leads you to conjecture that more material is needed to locate the murderer?"

"I heard the tip of my probes strike the stone tabletop under Benedict's body. That means all three bullets passed right through him. Those bullets must still be at the crime scene. How fast can we get there?"

"Galen can run with the wind, as a centaur can," Kajari said. "You and I will need horses from the Royal stables. It's a good two-hour ride to the Grove of the Willows."

I smiled grimly. "Then let's get saddled. I'm under that three-day deadline, so every moment counts.

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Chapter Nine

With a clatter, five sets of hooves thundered down the cobblestone-lined road that led, ruler-straight, away from the palace. Four horses, each snow white with midnight black manes, and a chestnut centaur. I sat on the steed in the middle, grasping the reins tightly in my sweaty grip.

Kajari followed slightly behind, Galen to my front. A pair of nattily attired knights bracketed us. The two Andeluvian horsemen were draped with chain mail and armed to the teeth with swords, shields, and an iron flail that looked as if it had been tipped with bits of barbed wire.

Okay, I'll just come out and say it.

The reason for my being in Andeluvia was tragic. The countdown to the war I was supposed to stop felt like a sword suspended over my head by a frayed piece of string. But pounding through the heart of the city on the back of a mighty steed, flanked by a wizard, the acting king, and a pair of armored knights?

It felt like I'd been made queen for the day at the local Renaissance Faire.

Dammit, it felt *cool*.

We moved at a canter, passing blocks of the same tall, narrow-fronted houses. People scattered to the sides, looking at us with scarcely hidden curiosity. The houses soon slumped in size to smaller cottages, now roofed with golden bunches of thatch. The cottages gave way to fields of wheat and a kind of waxy green vegetable that looked like an artichoke the size of a throw pillow. These in turn faded into hamlets set amidst rolling orchards. We rode along under wide-spreading branches, catching the occasional tart whiff of ripening apples.

I had to squint as we rode into the setting sun. For a second, I spotted an enormous, log cabin style tree house, perched high in the branches off to one side of the road. I craned my neck to get a better

look, but it disappeared into the dense foliage as we moved along. Duke Kajari saw my questioning glance and made a little shrug.

"Legislators," he said, which explained nothing at all. "They're still asleep right now."

The orchards gave way to a forest of sugar maple and ash trees. The horses gleamed with sweat, and even Galen had to mop at his brow. Kajari slowed our group to a gentle trot. The cobblestones gave out and our mounts' hooves now made muffled thuds against packed dirt. We rode on for a while, with the sound of the hoofbeats and the jingling of the guards' chain mail our only accompaniment.

Kajari spurred his mount to ride along at my right. Galen dropped back to trot along on my left. I noted that the centaur had brought along a small leather satchel, which he'd slung across one shoulder. The satchel itself sported shiny green scales and a heavy, gunmetal-gray lock. Whatever was inside, the Wizard didn't want it falling out.

"This is the main road to the Grove of the Willows," Kajari said. "The sacred place where Benedict and the ruler of the Centaur Realm would meet, usually once or twice over a given year."

"Let me guess. It's neutral ground between your two realms."

"That is so. On occasion, I would accompany Benedict, but he usually went by himself. He didn't even bring guards. As a show of trust, I believe."

"On that subject, I can shed additional illumination," Galen added. "King Benedict, for all his love of wine and merriment, liked the solitude of the ride."

"Interesting," I said. I chewed my lip for a moment. "Whoever killed Benedict would've had a few chances to simply ambush the King on this road. But it happened at this grove instead. Why?"

"Perhaps the killer was making haste?"

"Maybe. Or they could've been trying to make a statement. Trying to frame the most obvious suspects." I surveyed the road as it dwindled into the trees ahead. "Can you tell me more about what happened the day that Benedict…met his end?"

Galen nodded glumly.

"The Good King had been scheduled to ride to the Grove of the

Willows quite some time before. The subjects calendared pertained to trivial matters: trading rights along some disputed borders. He was reported to have traveled this way without incident, turned his mount over at the entrance to the grove, and awaited the centaurs at its central clearing, much as before. Then—"

"Wait, wait," I said, holding up a hand. "I need to know a lot more about what's going on here. For starters, who knew about his schedule to ride to the grove? And what about these disputes? For you folks, 'trivial' seems to mean 'no one died from the sword wound'. And as far as these 'reports' go, you're saying that you didn't witness any of the key events leading up to the crime?"

"The Good King's schedule was no state secret. I knew of it, as did Duke Kajari and all the nobles at court. And no, I didn't witness anything pertaining to the murder on that terrible day, for I spent it in my private study. I had asked the King permission to remain at the castle." Galen's cheeks colored a little as he added, "I made sure never to attend the meetings at the Grove. I felt that my presence would add an…unstable element."

An unstable element? I kept my face impassive, but I knew a dodge when I heard one. Galen the Good Wizard was hiding something.

"Galen's correct in that disputes were minor," Kajari said, as he shifted in his saddle uncomfortably.

"Nothing worth killing someone over, then?"

"Doubtful. But then, I wasn't present either. I'd spent the day out riding, on my own estate's business. Galen and I found out about the murder after the fact. A messenger arrived at court and summoned us to the grove with all due speed."

I let out an impatient breath as we came out into a large clearing. The dark, piney green of the forest behind us dropped away as I spoke. "This all sounds too damned second-hand to me. Who said that Benedict completed his journey safely, and who sent word back of the murder?"

"In each case, the same two people," Kajari said, with a rueful smile. "That would be Captain Vazura, who leads the Air Cavalry for

the man who rules these border lands: Lord Behnaz."

I groaned.

"Don't tell me…Vazura was the one who said I'd only be useful if I moved like a mink in heat, right?"

The Duke blushed. "The Captain has a…rather direct way of expressing himself."

"Spare me." I appreciated Kajari's courtly manners, but if we got back to that whole 'beautiful and fine character' thing again, I was going to scream. "And the other man…that was the male half of Lord and Lady Better-Than-Thou."

Galen choked off a laugh with an equine-sounding snort. Kajari threw him a reproachful look. The centaur shrugged in return.

"Truly, Lord Behnaz has played many roles in his life. But it must be said, he enjoyed being the thorn in the Good King's side far too much. Vazura may be a competent aerial commander, but he too advocated against Benedict's peaceful ways. A warrior with too much of a need to prove himself."

"I'm really getting a bad feeling about this," I said.

"Bad feeling?" Kajari raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, and in spades!" I twisted the warm, smooth leather of the reins irritably. "You're telling me that the people who had the closest access to the King—and the people who reported the crime—were ones that had axes to grind with Benedict. That smells like motive to me."

"Behnaz and Vazura are difficult. Yet it's unlikely that two loyal nobles would strike down their ruler."

"Agreed," Galen chimed in, animatedly. "Despite their differences of opinion, Benedict was well liked by all in his kingdom."

I looked away for a moment. Towards the end of the clearing lay a vast grove of willow trees, their slender branches and gray-green oval leaves tinted with the color of candle flame in the setting sun.

"You're both very convincing," I said quietly. "But for one thing."

"What might that be?"

"The fact that Benedict's lying dead on a stone slab right now."

Galen flinched like I'd punched him. One of the knights guarding

us let out a cough. Kajari set his jaw. His bright blue eyes flicked skyward, and he nodded, as if to himself. He pointed up and to the right as he spoke.

"Now you get a chance to find out how deep your 'bad feelings' run."

A shadow flitted by overhead. A disconcertingly large one, at that. I heard the beat of predatory wings, smelled the tiniest hint of musk. Heavy, feline, leonine. Next, the light from the sun flickered like a strobe as a host of wingbeats thumped by overhead. The horses whinnied nervously and pawed the ground.

My heart skipped a beat as my steed shifted skittishly as if he planned to bolt. Galen put his hand on the horse's neck, whispering something soothing, calming. I stared in wonder at what had landed in the clearing before us, blocking our way into the Grove of the Willows.

A flight of a half-dozen griffins, each the size of a full-grown Siberian tiger, landed with surprising delicacy in the short grass. Their leonine bodies shone with golden fur up to the point where any self-respecting lion would've had their mane. From that point on, feathers with the color and sheen of elephant ivory led up to a stern eagle's head and jackhammer-stout black beak. The same feathers, mixed with black bars or dots, lined the backs of their muscular wings.

But that wasn't the only thing that got my attention. Their armor and armored riders came in a close second. The griffins' forelimbs were covered in flexible metal segments which led up to a shining armor breastplate. This in turn hooked into the base of a saddle and harness. A leather-clad soldier perched in each saddle, bearing a sword, a short blue bow, and a quiver of rainbow-colored arrows.

I picked out Captain Vazura by his arrogant sneer and the blood-red mantle he had draped across his shoulders, similar to the purple one Duke Kajari wore. Lord Behnaz's mantle also came cut from the same style, only in the bright felt green of a cheap pool table. The portly Andeluvian noble made a face, as if he'd smelled something distinctly unpleasant.

"Air cavalry," I said. "I should have known."

“It takes a will of iron and no shortage of skill to work with a griffin,” Kajari said. “We used to use dragons. Terrible upkeep. Most ended up eating their riders. We still have a few dragons in the keep and care of Captains like Vazura. But only as weapons of last resort.”

“That’s good to know,” I said, as Vazura and Behnaz spurred their mounts towards us at a walk. And a ‘walk’ to a griffin means a ‘predatory lope’ to anyone in its path. I felt myself wanting to freeze up again, and almost violently shook the urge off. “What do they want with us?”

“Likely to welcome us to the Grove of the Willows. These are Behnaz’s lands, and Vazura operates under his authority.”

At that moment, Vazura reined in his mount, a proud-looking griffin with silvery sides. “What are you doing here?” the Captain demanded. “Turn back, or you will meet your deaths!”

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Chapter Ten

I'd already seen Duke Kajari blush. This time, as he faced the two nobles astride their battle-ready griffins, his face went white with fury. His eyes fairly speared through his subordinates and nailed them to the green boughs of the willow grove beyond.

"You bear a merry message for your Lord Regent," Kajari said, his voice as cold as a glacial lake. "Normally, I do not require that you or your Lord patron make the gesture of respect to the crown. Give it. Now."

Then something happened that I didn't expect. As I'd noted before, Kajari's voice was naturally deep and commanding. Certainly, it was the voice of someone who was used to being obeyed without question. But while Vazura and Behnaz didn't do anything to further inflame their Duke, they exchanged a look which spoke volumes. Captain Vazura turned to Lord Behnaz and raised an eyebrow as if to ask: *should we humor the Lord Regent?* Behnaz seemed to weigh this and nodded brusquely, as if deciding to go along with the game.

Question was, what game were these two playing?

Vazura and Behnaz both dismounted their griffins. With a comical creak of their shiny leather armor, they each went to one knee, looked to the ground, and held their right arm out, palm down. Together, they recited an oath in a bored-sounding drone.

"We serve the King and Lords of our beloved Andeluvia. May the Land Between the Forests never fall nor fail."

"Your gesture is accepted," Kajari said, sounding mollified. "Approach, and tell us why your greeting was so poor."

Behnaz got up and approached first. I'd marked him as a short, paunchy man who used expensive clothes to wrap an otherwise unappealing package. Closer up, nothing swayed my opinion otherwise. Without the fur-trimmed cap I'd seen him wearing at the court, his coarse blond hair and fat, ruddy cheeks made him look like a tubby scarecrow that had spent too much time in the sun.

“My Lord Regent,” he said, his voice toeing the line between respectful disdain and open sneer. “Captain Vazura and I have spotted armed groups of centaurs scouting this area. We’ve not been able to secure the Grove of the Willows, and it makes a fine spot for an ambush. Going in there would likely cost your party their lives.”

“Then you’d best remain here, Behnaz. On the Andeluvian side of the Grove, unless we need call for you.”

“I live to serve, my liege.”

“Really? In that case, you can serve me now. By answering some questions about King Benedict’s last day.” Behnaz’s mouth shut with a snap as he saw Kajari gestured ‘go ahead’ to me.

Good. See if the rat can wriggle free of the trap.

“Two days ago, Benedict supposedly came along this road, to meet with the centaurs,” I said. “I don’t have any eyewitnesses that he even got this far.”

“I…I was at my estates, but I have it on the best authority that he did.”

“Whose?”

“Oh, enough of this!” Captain Vazura rose and all but swaggered up to the side of my mount. Where his lord was fat and squat, the Air Cavalry commander stood slender and tall. Vazura had a long face, but a weak chin that hid beneath his trimmed black beard like a shy child. Fumes from an aseptic-smelling cologne he wore went straight down my throat like I’d been gargling a handful of moth balls.

“I know that Benedict must have reached the Grove safely. My scouts swept the road ahead of the Good King for any dangers. None were reported to me on that day, from the palace hinterlands to outside this very grove. As custom, I waited here with a patrol for him to emerge after his negotiations. Later that morning, we saw a party of centaurs enter the Grove via their usual path.”

He pointed with one leather-clad hand. I looked to the north, and saw a well-beaten dirt trail that led into the Grove from a broad, open slope of short grasses. Certainly, not a difficult place to spot a group of ten-foot tall creatures like centaurs coming or going.

“Shortly after the centaurs entered the grove, my patrol’s magic

detectors went off," he continued, holding up a pendant that looked as if it were made of sand-polished sea glass. "Alarmed, we saddled up and entered the grove. As we got close to the central clearing inside, we heard voices raised in argument. We were almost run over by the centaurs as they left. They left at a full gallop, with weapons unsheathed and without a word to us. Fearing the worst, we spurred our mounts on and found two bodies: King Benedict, and an ambassador he must have met there."

"One of the centaurs?"

Vazura rolled his eyes. "Of course not. Benedict came to the meeting, as always, unarmed. The wounds on the other ambassador's body came from the blade of a sword or firebolts from a magic staff. Both weapons are known to be used by centaurs."

"They are used with equal fervor by humans as well." Galen said pointedly.

"Wait," I said, urgently, "this other ambassador—he's the one who ended up on my autopsy slab, isn't he? Connor MacLeod."

"We don't know his name, but perhaps your world's sorcery is better than ours. He had no known next of kin, and we needed a way to bring you here. So the Head of Parliament suggested that we utilize his body in a productive manner."

"When did this unknown man get to the Grove, then? And how did you know he was an ambassador?"

"Again, I can answer that," Vazura chimed in. "He could have arrived here before my morning patrols. His clothes were well made but simple, in the style of the border regions nigh to the sea. Those regions have sent people here before; they are poor places, and will often travel on foot instead of horse."

"I'm still worried about how many assumptions you folks are making."

"Worried?" Vazura smiled at me. A greasy charm oozed from him like an oil slick. He put a hand on my leg at the knee. "Perhaps I could offer you a 'personal' escort into the grove? Show you how to ride more than a horse? Woman, if you're afraid, it'll take a man to calm any fears you have."

I reached down with one hand and grabbed Vazura's gloved pinky. I bent it backwards firmly, like I was peeling an unripe banana. He let out a startled yelp and danced a step back, out of my reach. I locked eyes with him as I spoke.

"Afraid? I'm not afraid of anything that wears pants."

This got more than a few laughs from the rest of the Captain's patrol. He swung his gaze to them, a murderous look on his face. The laughter stopped as quickly as if someone had flicked a switch. He stalked back to his griffin mount, flexing his hands ominously.

"It looks like the pleasantries are completed," Kajari said, and a wry smile played at the edge of his lips. He spurred his mount, and the rest of our original group followed him into the grove.

The griffins and their riders disappeared behind the walls of swaying green branches that hung from the large willow trees that surrounded us. Behnaz was right—this place was perfect for an ambush. The Grove of the Willows turned out to be a good deal smaller than I'd guessed at first. It only took a few minutes for the horses to walk to the central clearing.

The clearing itself was grass-covered and around the size of three or four city blocks. Around the perimeter, the willow trees hung their branches even more densely, like a wall of green blades. A great stone table lay in the center of the clearing, something covered in carved runes and large enough to tie a lion to. The table stood extremely high, as did the pair of matching marble benches. Décor made to appeal to the centaurs while allowing humans to dine with them.

"Right, let's start by looking at where you found the—" I started to say, as I brought my mount to a halt. My words cut off into a groan as I swung myself out of the saddle. The two solid hours of riding hadn't put legs in a happy place. They felt numb and tingly.

"Allow me," Galen said, as he quickly moved to my side before I fell over. He muttered a Nordic-sounding phrase and touched the top of my head. Something shot through me like the kind of static shock you get from walking across a shag carpet in the depths of winter. The muscles in my thighs and calves loosened and the tension simply drained away.

“Wow,” I remarked. I did a deep knee bend. “Galen, my friend, you would be able to coin a mint with that technique, if you went into sports medicine.”

“I know not what a ‘mint’ is, but if you say so, I don’t doubt it for a minute,” Galen said. He coughed into one massive hand, and then sadly gestured to an unremarkable piece of ground, about halfway between the table and the edge of the clearing. “When the messenger found me and Lord Kajari, he brought us here. We found the Good King’s body right there, lying on his back, head pointing towards the edge of the clearing.”

“And the unknown ‘ambassador’?”

“Propped up against one of the table’s benches, in front of where Benedict was found. Behnaz’s men swear that they did not move any of the ‘bodies’.”

“If only they’d also left the scene itself alone,” I sighed.

The ground’s traces had been completely muddled with multiple horse, griffin, and human prints. And the lack of bloodstains on the ground told me that someone had done a well-intentioned clean-up job. But that same ‘click’ I’d felt in my brain back at the House of Hospitalliers came back, even more strongly. I only had to check one more thing to make sure. I dug into my horse’s saddlebag to pull out two items.

The first, a charcoal stylus like Galen’s. The second, a coil of rope. I measured out a set amount and marked it with the stylus as my companions also dismounted their horses. I handed one end of the rope to Kajari. He looked at me, an uneasy, questioning look on his face.

“Since you’re the same height as Benedict, would you mind helping me with an…well, an experiment of sorts?” He nodded brusquely. I had him stand in the spot where Benedict had been found, facing towards the center of the clearing, while holding the line up at chest level. I then turned to the Wizard and handed him the remainder of the coil. “Galen, I need you to pay this out to the mark I put on the rope, in a straight line from where the Lord Regent is standing. Keep it as taut as you can.”

“Very well,” he said. He slowly backed up, passing the stone table, ending up just outside the dense circle of willow trees on the edge of the clearing. I stood off to the side, watching the rope carefully. The line lay just a little too flat.

“Raise up just a hair more,” I called to Galen. He did so, until I said ‘stop’. I followed the path of the line, now angled at a rough ten degrees, along the way to where Galen held his end. Just as I expected, it was high on him, at the upper edge of his chest. I checked the trees around Galen for markings, came up empty, and then had the centaur rejoin the group with me. I chewed a knuckle in thought. The markings on Benedict’s body made sense now.

I just didn’t like what the facts were telling me.

“You appear to have come to a conclusion,” Galen prompted. He shifted from one hoof to another in anticipation.

“Well, I think I know how part of the crime took place, at least.” I took back the rope end from Kajari and explained. “Benedict’s upper chest wound had a ten-degree downward angle. Based on the size of the wound and its clean entry pattern, the shot probably came from fifty, sixty feet away. Very close for a rifle. If we follow the line of the angle back that distance, it puts the shooter just beyond the edge of the clearing.”

“A good ambush point.” This from Kajari, whose frown seemed carved in granite now.

“Yes. Now, at that angle, Benedict’s killer would’ve had to have taken the shot from a nine-foot high platform. I didn’t see any evidence for a platform on the nearby trees. And there’s no willow branch sturdy enough to hold someone up at that height.” I took a deep breath before I continued. “But it’s the exact height at which a centaur would hold a rifle.”

“So now you think my people did this heinous act?” Galen demanded.

“I didn’t say that,” I held my hands out, palms up. “But the other two wounds make more sense now. If a centaur shot Benedict from the tree line at that range, the bullet might’ve been traveling too fast to do enough damage to kill him outright. Say that took place. The

centaur assassin comes out to see if the job's done. He stands right over Benedict, sees the king still breathing."

Kajari, Galen, and the two guards remained silent. They hung on every word, like I'd been reading them a most fascinating story.

"If a centaur's standing over a man lying prone on the ground, that puts about six feet between the rifle barrel and the body. That's what the two lower wounds were telling me, with the high angle and that stippling. The assassin did a double-tap on the trigger. To make sure that Benedict stayed down for good."

"It doesn't exactly look good for my people, does it?" Galen asked quietly.

I started to answer, but my words were cut off by a deep rumble that rippled through the ground.

A group of centaurs, their golden armor and dark hooves flashing, galloped into the clearing. Each centaur carried a steel-tipped lance, point held skyward for the moment. The lance tips gleamed with an evil light.

One of them pointed in our direction and shouted.

"There they are!"

They let out a bloodthirsty bellow. The earth shook and my ears rang with battle cries as they charged.

Just my rotten luck.

The one time I'm asked to stop a war, and everyone decides to start early.

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Chapter Eleven

The centaurs bore down on us with a sound that was one part cavalry charge, one part industrial avalanche.

Their hooves thundered in my ears. The jingle of their golden chain mail made a tinny counterpoint. Wild manes of hair bobbed above ferocious faces. The bright steel tips of their lance points came forward and down like a breaking wave.

Galen trotted a few steps forward, a look of determination on his face that I'd not seen before. He murmured an incantation under his breath. I saw it more than heard it, with the din around us.

The Wizard held his arms out to the sides, fists clenched. With a cry, he flung up one arm, releasing a fine blue dust into the air. I smelled something both warm and sooty. Cinnamon-maple syrup cooked over a campfire.

A sound like the sizzle of raw meat thrown into a hot pan.

A wall of blue flame flashed into existence between us and the charging centaurs. They skidded to a halt, rearing and lashing out with their forehooves. The flames vanished, leaving a line of white ash on the ground.

The lead centaur, a massive chestnut stallion, stepped ahead of the group. His beard, braided into long brown and gray plaits, bobbed as he shook his head in his vehemence.

"A pox on your magic, boy!" the stallion shouted. "To do that to us!"

"It was, sadly, out of necessity," Galen replied. He raised his voice and added, "Have you lost all sense of propriety? Making war on sacred ground?"

"War? You have forgotten our ways, Sturmgalen!" The stallion paced back and forth agitatedly. "Had we attacked, your bodies would already lie steaming in the sun. And we'd be playing kick-ball with your severed heads."

"Be that as it may," Galen said. "Lances to ground, if you so

please."

"If we so please," the stallion said, mocking Galen's tone. But he shouted a set of orders to his warriors. As one, they plunged their lances into the ground point first. The massive weapons stuck, quivering, in the soft turf like a set of jumbo-sized lawn darts. "Have you finally turned your back on your people?"

"I think not," Galen said.

Off to the side, I heard a new commotion: the sound of human shouting and the terrible screech of predatory birds. Galen cocked his head, listening, and then flung up his other fist. Again, blue dust flew into the air, followed by the scent of charcoal mixed with spicy warm cinnamon.

Behnaz and Vazura's patrol emerged at a lope from the trees. They'd not taken a half-dozen steps before the wall of blue flame stopped them in their tracks. As with the centaurs, the griffins reared, lashing out with their lion's paws, shrieking defiance.

The flames subsided. I heard muttered curses from the griffin riders. More than a few riders threw a dark, suspicious glance at the Wizard.

"You're really Mr. Popularity today, Galen," I ventured.

"It had to be done." Galen said flatly. "I no longer trust my sire to rein in the zeal of his warriors."

"Your sire? I mean, that's your father?" I think my voice jumped an octave in a kind of girly squeak.

"The same. Skallgrym Angbor of the House of Friesain, the current King of the Centaur Realm."

"Current?" I didn't like how temporary that sounded.

"So long as no one defeats the King in combat, he retains his throne," Galen shook his head. "It makes the centaur nobility power-hungry, and more than a little paranoid. I do wish there were a better way."

"In that, we are in complete agreement," Kajari said. He stepped forward and raised his voice. "Why do you grace our presence this way, King Angbor?"

Galen's father—his *sire*, I corrected myself—laughed coarsely. He

trotted right up to the Duke, looming over the man. The golden ringlets of his chain mail draped from shoulder down to the bottom edge of his horse body.

From there, the centaurs all had strapped articulated armor plates to their legs and across their equine backs. A sword hilt as wide as both of my wrists put together protruded from a large, well-worn leather scabbard that hung next to one of Angbor's saddle bags.

Now I saw the family resemblance in the facial features. Galen also had the same wide jaw and dark, brooding brows. But Angbor's eyes held none of the gentle intelligence I saw in his son.

"You humans and your flowery talk. This is a reconnaissance. One done in force!"

"Why now?"

"We saw the movement of your griffin troops. We saw your party enter the grove. I was curious. So why did *you* come, Lord Regent?"

Unbelievable. This horse's ass was a carbon copy in attitude to Behnaz and Vazura. Each saw the other side moving, which justified their moving, and so on. Of course, that was when I got thrown into the middle of it all.

"We came on the request of Lady Dayna Chrissie. She is from another world, one where she solves crimes such as the murder of our lord. A murder in which you and your people appear to be at fault."

"We? At fault?" Angbor huffed. "You two-legged freaks of nature are even less intelligent than I thought."

"Really? How did a thought get lodged in that bone head of yours?"

I didn't see this going anywhere productive, so I spoke up.

"Maybe you can enlighten me instead," I said. My knees shook a little, but I did my best to hide it. This damn sure wasn't like facing down Bob McClatchy. McClatchy didn't have a blade strapped to his side that looked like an extra-large meat cleaver.

Or the attitude to use it on anyone he felt like.

"King Angbor, did you see Benedict on his last day?"

"I did, curse his name." At that, an angry mutter came from the rank and file of the Andeluvians. "I and my patrol came to meet him,

as usual, in this grove. I am not fond of humans, either by sight or smell. But I respected Benedict. Or I did, until that day!"

"Okay, so you met him here."

"That we did. A short meeting it was."

"What about the other man? The ambassador with him?"

Angbor stared at me for a moment. He shook his head ruefully. "You're daft as a gamecock, little woman. Benedict came alone."

"You didn't see anyone—"

"I'm not blind," he snapped. "Benedict seemed healthy enough, for one as close to being an ale sop as he. And how did he use his health? To denounce me, and the centaur peoples! To threaten us with war! I did not kill Benedict. But had I thought him a lesser man, his head would've adorned my lance that day!"

Back to the severed head thing. I had a feeling that Angbor didn't play well with others, even as a little kid. Little pony, whatever.

"You're a liar and a murderer," Vazura spat. "No sooner did you leave this grove than I arrived and found our King's body lying on the ground!"

"Our ruler does not lie!" One of the centaurs, a red-haired stallion with the markings of a pinto, advanced a step in anger. "With but a word from Angbor, we'd chop our way through you as if we were plowing our fields!"

"Why not try?" Behnaz said, his voice dripping with venom. "The griffins have sharpened their claws. And they haven't eaten yet." As if to drive the point home, his griffin mount made a sound between a feline hiss and the high-pitched scream of a hawk.

"Well, King Angbor," Kajari said, "do you really think that you have the upper hand? We could play this out right now. Trial by combat, as in the olden times. Before our civilized ways of today. Before the Good King assumed the throne."

The air filled with the terrible sound of steel being drawn from leather scabbards. The humans drew their weapons in time with a terrible feline hiss from the griffins. A feral gleam shone from the creatures' unblinking yellow eyes.

The centaurs fell into a battle line. Instead of yanking their lances from the ground, the centaurs pulled out pairs of wicked-looking swords. They held one weapon in each massive hand. The wavy patterns in their sword blades reflected the last failing light of the evening.

Damn it all!

My eyes flicked back and forth across the clearing. No one—not Duke Kajari, not Lord Behnaz, and sure as hell not King Angbor—was going to put a stop to the madness before it engulfed everyone. I felt my pulse hammering, threatening to burst from my wrists in arterial spurts.

I didn't know what to do.

"But I'm sure as hell not going to freeze up again," I muttered under my breath.

And with that, I stepped out into the space between Kajari and Angbor.

"*All right! That's enough from all of you!*"

My announcement hit like a clap of thunder on a quiet, sunlit day. Not that anyone put away their weapons. But almost to a person, they blinked or stared. The points of the swords dipped ever so slightly. I had their attention for the moment, so I ran with it.

"I'm a stranger to this world," I said, loud enough for everyone in the clearing to hear me. "I've got no axe to grind for Andeluvia, or with the Centaur Realm. But if all of you want to prove who's toughest, who can piss the farthest, be my guest. Just go do it somewhere else!"

That got a smattering of laughter out of the warriors. It cut the tension a little. So far so good.

"Why should we do that?" Captain Vazura demanded.

"Because you're all interfering with my ability to do my *job*."

Another laugh from the assembled men and stallions. This time it was King Angbor who spoke.

"And for what reason should we listen to you?"

"If I can't do my work, then I can't prove your innocence, King Angbor."

The sounds of muttering broke out. Kajari remained quiet, his face a stony mask. Angbor barked a command to his troops and they went silent.

“You’re trying to prove my people’s innocence?”

“No, Angbor. I’m trying to find out who murdered Good King Benedict.” I inclined my head towards him as I added, “But I believe you. You had no part in Benedict’s death.”

Now the sounds of murmuring escalated into shouts and frenzied discussion. Both Angbor and Behnaz now had to order their troops to quiet down. The centaur king looked me over again, much as Kajari had before.

“There is more steel to you than first appears, woman.”

“There’s more when it’s needed,” I said. “And I need something more from you in turn.”

“What might that be?”

I took a deep breath and spoke one more time.

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Chapter Twelve

Maybe standing at the verdant green heart of the Grove of the Willows did something to me. Perhaps there was something sacred, something magical about it. All I knew was that I had no trouble standing my ground in front of the King of the Centaur Realm. My mind felt razor sharp and laser focused.

The Andeluvian nobles—at least some of them—had a thin skein of courtliness I could play off of. Not Angbor. He personified the medieval Viking, a ten-foot tall mountain of muscle, sinew, armor, and bad attitude.

So I spoke my mind. Plainly. Bluntly.

"Call this off, Angbor. Stop this before it all ends in fire."

A mix of emotions played across his face. He absently rubbed one of his beard plaits in thought. Angbor let out a sigh. Coming from such a large, deep-throated creature, the sigh sounded more like the release of a truck's air brakes.

"No," he rumbled. "Honor must be paid."

I heard what sounded like a squawk of agreement from one of the griffins, but I didn't turn to look. I focused on what Angbor had to say.

"But–"

"*No*, Lady Dayna Chrissie. You know now that we centaurs have been unjustly accused. I cannot relent until that accusation is dropped. Until recompense paid—by treasure. Or by blood."

"Father, be reasonable," Galen said. He trotted up next to me, hands out, beseeching. "I have lived among the humans. I have learned much from them. They are different, true, but it does not mean we cannot study–"

"You have done more than 'live' among humans!" Angbor spat, his thoughtful moment vanishing like dew in the sun. The veins in his neck stood out as he raised his voice. "You have forsaken our way! You cringe and stoop and wheedle your way with them. And for what? Magic! The last refuge of those of rotten minds and arms too

weak to swing a sword!"

"Yes, my sire, I have dedicated my life to my studies! But I did not forsake our way. I did not forsake the understanding of power."

Galen hurriedly slipped off the strap holding the locked satchel he'd brought along. His hands betrayed a small tremble as he offered it up.

"I've bound all of my writings together," he said, urgently, as if trying to press his words into his father's mind. "They list magic, to be sure, but all for the good! Spells to find ore, to help crops grow, to mend rent armor, to–"

Angbor's arm came up. He swung it in a vicious arc. The back of his hand smashed Galen across the face.

A meaty *smack* echoed through the clearing.

Blood flew in a thin spray from Galen's nose. The Wizard staggered back a few paces. He hung his head, slipped the satchel under one arm, and turned away.

Duke Kajari stood nearby. He scowled at me in a manner that Bob McClatchy would've applauded, and then tried his best to emulate. I started to speak, but the Duke cut me off.

"As much as I've enjoyed this little family drama, it has no bearing as to what's at stake," Kajari said sharply. "You may believe that the centaurs are innocent. I am not convinced."

"Nor I!" called Behnaz. Vazura nodded agreement by bobbing his head like a loyal mastiff.

I gritted my teeth. "But can't you see? This doesn't add up at all!"

"Save your breath, woman," Angbor said, though not unkindly. "It is wasted on fools. Fools who sit in court or play with magic, while others make or take what they need by their own hands! Why not go out and stop the tides instead? Go out and stop winter from coming, while you're at it."

"Maybe I'll do just that," I said, facing him squarely. "If you know you're innocent, then you can damn well help me prove it. Give me some help to find Benedict's real killer."

Angbor smiled then. It wasn't a pleasant thing to see. It felt like I'd been sized up by a hungry grizzly bear.

“You need a centaur to help? So be it. Take my worthless son. He’ll be of no use on the battlefield. Unless he wants to help mourn for the dead.”

And with that parting shot, Angbor trotted back towards his patrol. The centaurs sheathed their weapons, pulled their lances from the ground, and left the Grove of the Willows at a gallop. Kajari and the rest of the Andeluvians didn’t take their hands off their weapons until the sound of hoofbeats faded in the distance.

Galen half-walked, half-stumbled out of the clearing in the other direction.

“That went well,” Kajari said dryly.

“It sure as hell did. No one got killed.” I looked towards where Galen had left. “One badly wounded, though.”

“What makes you so sure that Angbor’s innocent?”

“Simple. Lack of motive.”

“Lack of motive?” Kajari demanded, “I take it you heard King Angbor’s words. He’d have our entrails cast upon the ground if he wanted to.”

“If he *wanted* to,” I shot back. “Angbor was specific. If Benedict had been a lesser man, Angbor would have killed him that last day. In other words, he had a great deal of respect for the Good King. Obviously, he preferred to deal with Benedict over you, Lord Behnaz, or me. I don’t see a motive to kill him off.”

“What of the foreign ambassador, then?”

“I don’t know. If he got here after Benedict, then Vazura’s men should have seen him arrive. But if he got here before, why didn’t the centaurs see him?”

“Perhaps he was in league with the assassin. They had a falling out, he was killed, and then stashed in the woods before Benedict met Angbor.”

“Or King Angbor is lying through his horsey face,” Behnaz said sourly.

“Funny you should say that,” I replied. “Your man Vazura said this ‘ambassador’ you found was killed by sword cuts and a firebolt from a magic staff. He called them centaur weapons, but he’s wrong.

They're *Andeluvian* weapons. But Benedict's murder used a weapon from *my* world. Why?"

Kajari made a slight shrug under his mantle. "It could be that the murderer hired someone from your world. To keep their hands free of blood."

I shook my head. "Doubtful. Whoever this is, I'm sure they're an Andeluvian. They don't know much about my world's weapons, but they're learning, and learning fast."

"As Galen would say, that's pure conjecture."

"Maybe, maybe not. There's one way I can find out, but I need something first." I took a breath, and then plunged in. "If Angbor gave me someone to work this case with me, then the least the kingdom of Andeluvia can do is follow suit. Give me someone who can assist me, work with me."

"I agree," Kajari said, nodding. "I will help you."

And again, the Andeluvian nobles surprised me. Up to this point, Behnaz and Vazura hadn't exactly been model citizens, eager to toe the Lord Regent's line. But now, their attitude took a curious flip.

Together, they clamored against the Duke's offer to help me.

"Ridiculous!" Behnaz said, "The Lord Regent cannot go out playing part-time investigator when we're about to plunge into war!"

"I'm sure that I can appoint another to–"

"Might I remind you," Captain Vazura added, rubbing his hands together briskly, "that the blood in your veins is the only one noble enough to hold the crown until Benedict's son returns?"

Kajari's eyes darted back and forth between the two Andeluvians. It looked to me like his mind was working furiously, trying to find a hole in their logic. Each objection he tried to make met with a sterner response.

"Must I come out and say it?" Behnaz said, "You are the sole member of the Good King's extended family who can lead us."

"If you are killed, there is no clear successor," Vazura warned. "Andeluvia will be thrown into turmoil on the eve of invasion. And for what? The passing whims of this otherworldly trollop?"

"A passing whim?" I demanded, as my temper slipped its final

notch, “For the record, I’ve had just about enough of every single one of you. Excuse me for holding up the damn war! If it makes you feel better, I’m just here to nail the bastard who’s out to kill *me*. Then I’ll step back and let you idiots slaughter each other to your heart’s content!”

A moment of near silence followed. Everyone glowered at each other. Finally, Kajari smacked his fist into his palm in frustration.

“Curse you all for your slavish following of custom,” he gritted. “Fine. I will not go. I will not help find Benedict’s murderer. Who, then? Who will step up and represent the Good King’s realm in this endeavor?”

Lord Behnaz shook his head side to side. Captain Vazura crossed his arms and followed suit. The two knights and the assorted riders in the Air Cavalry looked down at the ground, into the sky, or into the dark green of the willows. They didn’t meet anyone’s eyes.

Everybody went curiously, oddly silent.

The loamy, wet smell of churned up sod hung in the breeze.

And then I heard a voice. Strangely accented. Throaty with gravel, as if it hadn’t been used in a long while. It was so soft that for a second, I thought that I’d imagined it.

“I shall do it,” the voice said. “I shall help.”

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Chapter Thirteen

For a moment, I scanned the faces of the men that surrounded me in the Grove of the Willows. The air felt still, confined, even though the cool of evening began to seep in. Kajari and the two knights that had accompanied us from the palace stood silently, gazes intent on the Air Cavalry group.

It hadn't been Behnaz's voice that I'd heard. The Andeluvian lord looked towards Captain Vazura, a surprised look on his face. But it wasn't Vazura's voice I'd heard either. Right then, the Captain gave a kick with his heels, hindered by the heavy stirrups that he'd slipped his boots into.

"Be quiet," he said roughly. "You have no reason to speak here."

"Naught but one." I blinked, uncomprehending. Vazura frowned, staring down—at his saddle?—as the voice continued. "Honor demands that I assist, if thou shalt not."

Vazura gave another kick, this one with more force. "Enough! Fly, damn you. If you will not hold your tongue, then it's time we departed."

"Nay." The black and yellow beak of Vazura's mount opened and closed, matching the sound. The griffin twisted his head, focusing one eye on his rider. "I shall do what I must, my Captain. Dismount."

Spluttering with anger, Vazura pulled his boots from the stirrups and slid down the griffin's furry side. His eyes fairly blazed with indignation.

"You ungrateful, featherbrained…" Vazura choked out, between curses. "You speak of honor? When you leave your rider stranded?"

"I speak as such, Captain." The griffin worked his great pile-driver of a beak, as if remembering its use. Although his words still came slowly, his voice had already lost the worst of the gravelly sound. "Thou hast refused to assist a defender of the realm. This woman steps forth. She bears no small risk of death. I shall not follow thy path off the way of the just. I shall help."

“You wish to help her? So be it, Grimshaw! I call you oath-breaker. Disloyal!” And with that, Vazura roughly yanked off the griffin’s armored leggings, breastplate, and halter. Next, he lifted off the finely crafted leather saddle and dropped it in the dirt. “I hereby strip you of your rank and title in the Royal Air Cavalry. Begone!”

The remaining griffins stayed silent. Their bright golden eyes remained wide and staring. Though they remained in their traces, I saw glances traded.

But I couldn’t read human expressions through their stern eagle faces. Grimshaw padded over to me, like a fur-and-feather covered Great Dane. He turned and sat dejectedly at my side.

I’d been wrong to joke earlier with Galen about being Mr. Popular. It looked like I was angling for that award all by myself. Kajari pinched the bridge of his nose, looking for all the world like he was trying to stave off a migraine.

“Now that you’ve deprived the Captain of his mount, is there anything else you would like before we return to the palace?” Kajari asked. “I suppose I could detail an entire regiment of the palace guard to you. Maybe to escort you around the kingdom. It’s not like we need them, after all.”

“Now that you mention it,” I said, startling him. “Before we lose the last of the light, I’d like for your men and their griffins to sweep the woods to our rear. I need them to look for a bullet. It’s a piece of metal the size of a finger joint. It’ll have left a little hole in the ground, or on a tree trunk.”

Kajari nodded, understanding, and then gave the orders. The cavalrymen dismounted and led their griffins into the woods. The Duke walked off to a different corner of the clearing to converse animatedly with Vazura and Behnaz. The discussion didn’t sound particularly lighthearted or happy.

Above us, the sky turned from gold to a dark purple mixed with Pepto-Bismol pink. The breeze picked up, carrying with it the rich perfume of blooming night jasmine. I inhaled, tasted the evening air, listened to the crack of branches behind me and the distant murmur of conversation.

I also listened to the smooth, deep breathing of the creature that sat next to me. As I tried to figure out what to say, I reflexively put my hand out to touch the griffin's shoulder, right by where his wings lay furled. His fur, dark gold shot through with a great deal of iron gray, felt surprisingly soft. Kitten soft.

"Thank you, Grimshaw," I said awkwardly. What else could I say? This creature, a stranger to me in more ways than one, had just been dressed down and thrown out of his lord's service. All because of me.

"'Tis I who should thank you, Milady Chrissie," the griffin said quietly. "You do me great honor, allowing me to serve one last time."

"I do?" I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. I glanced over to where the Andeluvian lords continued to talk. They weren't listening in.

"Honor counts for all with a griffin," Grimshaw said, also carefully watching the men converse. "I am getting old. 'Ere the battle comes, Vazura planned to do what thou just witnessed. Strip me of mine own rank, toss me like used linen."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised that Vazura would do that," I said, nodding. Feeling a little braver, I moved my hand to stroke the soft feathers atop the griffin's head. He didn't purr, not exactly, but he leaned a little more into my touch. "I'm sorry to hear that, Grimshaw. But I'm glad you're on my, uh, team."

He chuckled, a soft but resonant sound punctuated with the clack of his beak. "'Tis not death in battle, but serving you shall do. Thou hast a stern heart, milady. Perhaps a griffin will be able to guard and guide you."

"I don't doubt that for a second," I said with a smile. "Just ease off on the 'miladys' if you can. Dayna will do nicely."

Now the griffin did let out a purr. His great wings rustled softly. "Thou hast honored me a second time with thy name. Call me Shaw, then."

"Shaw it is," I said. And with a final stroke of his head feathers, it felt like I'd sealed the deal with the griffin. "Wait here. I need to go find our Wizard."

Shaw nodded and lay down, looking at least slightly less

depressed. Which about summed up my feelings right then, truth be told. With a single glance back, I left the clearing, following Galen's trail.

The light level dropped sharply as I went into the trees, and it took my eyes a minute to adjust. Once they did, it wasn't too hard picking out the odd hoof print in the dirt. But mostly, I followed the most logical trail—the one with the fewest low-hanging branches to block the passage of a ten-foot tall centaur. It was still, cool, and slightly damp in the depths of the grove. The air held a green, grassy scent that reminded me of the taste of ground sassafras leaves.

I rounded the trunk of one of the larger trees and came across where Galen had sat himself down between a pair of sprawling, gnarly willow roots. He had neatly folded his equine legs under his body while he pored obsessively over a bundled sheaf of parchments. On the ground before him lay the open scale-leather satchel.

Galen didn't say anything or acknowledge my presence. His face still bore the angry red imprint of his father's hand. A smudge of clotted blood dotted one nostril. I walked over to where I could sit on a humped bundle of roots from the next willow over. I settled down as best I could on the hard wood, about an arm's reach away, and waited. It didn't take long. I didn't think it would.

"It's not fair!" he finally blurted out, "Any of this!"

I kept my voice neutral, sympathetic. "Care to tell me about it, Galen?"

He ran his fingers through his long, disheveled hair. "I find that I would like to, Dayna. What I mean is…it feels sometimes like the world has decided, no, *conspired* to play a joke on me. To make a joke of my life."

I kept quiet and nodded. There were more than a few times I felt the same way about my own existence.

"When I was but a colt, my father ascended to the throne of the Centaur Realm. He did this by killing the other six contenders to the crown at that time. It earned him the name Skallgrym Angbor. That translates from the old centaur tongue as 'Angry Skullsplitter'." He let out a snort. "When your sire has a name like that…it takes some living

up to."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

"Only once, two decades past, has anyone dared challenge him. After all, there's never been a warrior like my sire, so a challenge would be tantamount to suicide. So guess what kind of centaur comes within a whisker of defeating him, of knocking him off his belligerent throne?"

"A Wizard?"

"A Wizard. The first Archmage-class Wizard the centaurs ever produced. Until then, anyway."

"Until you came along."

Galen hung his head.

"Were I born to any other sire, I'd be a credit to my people. But since I was fated to be Sturmgalen, of Angbor's get? I am nothing but a source of shame." He gestured angrily with the bound bundle of parchment, making as if to crush the pages in one huge fist. "I thought…if I could show him what I've achieved, how I could help our peoples…"

I reached out, laid my hand on his. Gently, I took the sheaf of parchments from him. He watched me, eyes brimming, as I carefully smoothed out the sheets and tucked them back into the satchel.

"Galen, I wish I knew a way to bring you and your father together," I said. "But can I share something with you?"

Galen nodded, and then cocked his head to listen.

"My mom and I have always gotten along just fine," I explained. "Save for one thing. She loved watching Olympic figure skating. That's a kind of sporting contest, where I'm from. She loved it so much that she decided that I was going to be a champion figure skater too."

"You did not follow along the chosen path?"

"I tried for a while, Galen. I'm pretty well coordinated. It's not like I'm going to choke on my chewing gum if I try to walk at the same time. But after a few years of practice, doing jumps and spirals and twirls till my nose turned blue, my coach broke the news to her. I just wasn't talented enough to compete. Not in the pro leagues."

"I take it that your mother was incensed about this."

I shook my head. “She wasn’t into heavy drama. She let me be. What I got into was biology class. Doing wonderfully girly things, like bringing home bugs I’d pinned up in glass cases. Going on about how neat it was to dissect tapeworms. And during my senior year, I won the Chicago High School Science Fair.”

“That was a great honor, I gather?”

“In my mind, it was. I brought home this marble plaque and showed it to her. Mom looked at it, smiled, and said, ‘how very nice’. Like I’d brought her some tulips from the garden. And then she went back to the book she was reading.”

Galen’s expression showed some sympathy, but also puzzlement. “So…she disapproved of your winning?”

“Not at all. It just didn’t mean anything to her. I could bring home the Nobel Prize—another big brainy award—and it would mean less to her than if I’d gotten a mention as a figure skater in the *Pike County Gazette*.” I sighed. “My point is, if your father doesn’t value wizardry, you’re never going to impress him by becoming the best wizard around. It won’t change a thing.”

“What would you do, were you trotting in my hoof prints?”

“If it were up to me?” I said, considering. “If learning magic gave me the real reason to get out of bed and not waste the day, then I’d go out and be the best damned wizard I could be. For myself, and no one else.”

Galen picked up his satchel and slowly rose to his feet. I followed suit, though my head didn’t brush the lowest branches the way his did. The Wizard brushed the dust off his satchel, slung it back over his shoulder, and for a moment, I thought I saw a tiny wisp of a grin. Galen reached out and laid his warm hand on my shoulder.

“You’ve given me a great deal to ponder, Dayna,” he said simply. “I’m in your debt, and as per my sire, I’m also in your service. Is there anything I can do for our cause right now?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” I said. We started back towards the clearing and I explained. “I have the Air Cavalry searching for one of the bullets that Benedict was shot with. I figured that you can help me get the other two.”

“I can utilize magic to detect and influence small metal objects,” Galen agreed, as he lifted a bunch of low-hanging branches that blocked our way. We stepped back into the clearing, where the griffin riders had returned, and went over to the nondescript patch of earth where Benedict had fallen.

Kajari came up to me. He held a small, badly warped piece of metal in his palm, and then let it roll off into my outstretched hand.

“One of the griffin riders found your bullet, buried deep in the heartwood of one of the trees,” he said. “Is this what you sought?”

“Part of it,” I acknowledged. “Galen, can you cast on this patch of ground over here? If I’m right, and the killer shot Benedict twice more as the King lay prone, the bullets would be buried in this dirt somewhere.”

“Most certainly.” And with a gesture and a word, he did so.

A couple startled exclamations came from the men as a pair of bullets bobbed to the surface with a percussive, champagne-cork *pop*.

I scooped up the pieces of metal, feeling triumphant. I didn’t have my hands on the collar of Benedict’s killer, not yet. But I could still read the evidence right, come up with the events at the crime scene. It felt good.

The feeling vanished as my arms goose-pimpled like nobody’s business. All around the clearing, from the dark recesses of the willows, dozens of bright, unblinking eyes stared at us.

I’d been out in the woods at night before, and I knew the red-gold reflections from coyotes, deer, dogs, and raccoons.

These eyes were brighter. Bigger. Fist-sized, almost.

Alien.

My skin crawled as more and more eyes winked into place around us, sealing us off from any retreat.

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Chapter Fourteen

The dark evening sky sat like a charcoal gray lid atop the greenery of the forest. Our four horses, griffin, and centaur picked our way along the trail that led back towards the palace. The two knights carried lit torches to light our way forwards.

All the way from where we'd left the grove, the ghostly, teacup-sized eyeballs continued to watch us. To my annoyance, everyone in the party just ignored them. Many of the eyes would vanish silently, and then appear elsewhere. My arms turned to gooseflesh as I saw something…horrible. The rising moon's luminescence lit up the forest next to a pair of those eyes. I caught a glimpse of wicked, curving horns, frosted bone white in the moonlight.

I know that whoever or whatever those peepers belonged to couldn't have been hostile. But I didn't feel enough at ease to ask about them. Look, I'd just earned a bit of respect from everyone in the group. I'd showed enough courage to stand up to the combined idiocy of the centaur and human nobility. I didn't want to erase that advantage by looking nervous.

I was able to keep my curiosity to myself for over hour before I spoke up.

True to form, Duke Kajari's answer told me absolutely nothing.

Me, acting casual and disinterested: "You know, I can't help but notice that our ride back is being watched."

Kajari, sincerely being casual and disinterested: "The Legislature."

I gritted my teeth. I suppose that I could have spoken to Galen instead, but the centaur seemed lost in his own thoughts. Plus, I hadn't exactly endeared myself to Duke Kajari, given the events at the sacred grove.

I didn't like that. Kajari at least appeared to be on my side, and I wanted to keep him there, if I could. I figured that talking with him about something uniquely Andeluvian might help repair the bond. I tried to come at the subject from another angle.

“So tell me about the Legislature. How they tie into the government.”

“What is there to tell?” Kajari’s rich purple mantle shifted as he made an eloquent shrug. “The King and the nobles enforce the laws, keep the peace. Parliament writes the laws. They set the tax code. They decide where the money goes, for everything from our soldiers to the roads.”

“Sounds a little like how it works in my country,” I remarked. “How often do you hold elections?”

“Elections? Where you count votes?” Kajari made a snort that could’ve come from Galen. “What a waste of time. Legislators are selected by blood and ranked by seniority. As is right and proper.”

I decided to let that one pass. Besides, what he had to say next got a lot more interesting.

“While you were out retrieving our court Wizard, I received a summons. Parliament wishes to meet you, immediately.”

“I’m flattered, I guess. But what for? To help the investigation? Or just have dinner with the new woman in town?”

“Both, perhaps. As a whole, I find our legislators a little…strange. Galen’s spell to bring you here cost a good amount. Likely as not, they want to see what their money purchased. Parliament has a reputation for grasping at coins the way a hawk can snatch up a hare.”

I can’t say that I liked the idea of being shown off to a bunch of oddball professor types. It made me feel like a schlocky souvenir that someone had picked up in the gift shop at the Sears Tower. Then again, if I were in their position, I suppose that I’d be interested in seeing what the Wizard dragged in.

“If Parliament controls the money, maybe I can make a pitch to them,” I said offhandedly, trying to lighten the mood. “I could use some funds to hire a private detective, for starters.”

Kajari gave me a look. “Are you saying your skills are not up to the task?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. But I’m used to working in a lab. Other people are more suited to go around trying to winnow out the suspects.” My mind lit briefly on Alanzo Esteban’s kind face.

“Have you made any progress in your ‘winnowing’?”

“Well, as Lord Regent, you’re effectively ‘king’ until Benedict’s son gets back, right?” Kajari nodded curtly. I listened to the creak of the leather armor and saddles around me, mixed with the clink of chain mail. “You seem to be quite comfortable in the role. Forgive me if that makes you sound like a suspect.”

“Forgiveness is granted.” Kajari made a weary sigh. He glanced around at our companions, as if to ensure they weren’t actively listening in. “I have no desire to rule the kingdom of Andeluvia. If I did, then the way Benedict’s murder took place makes no sense.”

“How so?” Ahead in the distance, I could now make out the soft glow of the lights from the town. The tart, granny-smith tang of apples told me we were back in the outlying orchards.

“I’ve noticed that you’re fond of lists. So I shall give you two reasons.” Kajari said, and I caught a gleam of his smile in the dim torchlight as he held up a pair of fingers in a V-shape. I couldn’t help but smile back. “First, if I wanted Benedict’s realm, I’d have taken care to kill both Benedict *and* his heir—his only son. Second, I wouldn’t implicate the centaurs. Why risk inheriting a kingdom that’s about to plunge into war? A war where we’d be badly outmatched, if not for the griffins.”

I shook my horse’s reins in irritation. “You make a good case. But even so, a lot of people stay on my list.”

“True. If you believe that I could have killed Benedict, then you’re all but surrounded by suspects. Lord Behnaz wants to expand his lands and grow richer. His underling, Captain Vazura, wishes for glory in battle above all else.”

“So a war serves each of their purposes. All too well.”

“Consider one other.” Kajari nodded towards where Galen’s tall form was a silhouette in the darkness. “Our Wizard professes loyalty to us. But you saw how desperate he was for paternal approval. Could that not have moved him to strike Benedict down, in a misguided attempt to gain it?”

I pondered this silently as our little caravan went on. The packed earth of the path shifted back to paved cobblestone with a clatter of

equine hooves. We picked up speed as individual houses turned into hamlets, then stretches of town block. The eyes following us fell behind and vanished. But that wasn't what concerned me, once I heard the harsh panting coming from the griffin beside me.

Shaw loped alongside the horse, keeping up, but it was an obvious strain on him. His breaths came in heavy rushes like the heaving of a furnace bellow. I spurred my horse on to catch up to Kajari and let him know, but right then, I saw the high rampart of the castle wall, marked by a line of flickering torches. Galen cupped a hand to his mouth and called out to one of the sentries.

"'Ware in the castle! Duke Kajari's company approaches!"

An answering hail. A massive wooden gate, the height and width of a firehouse door, swung open to admit us with a creak. We went on through and into the wide, grassy expanse of a courtyard, illuminated by yet more torches and the silver-coin brightness of the moon, still only a few inches above the horizon.

Shaw plunked himself down on one stretch of turf, panting. A page boy dressed in a robin's egg blue outfit came up and handed the Duke a piece of parchment as soon as the man swung down off his horse. I followed suit and got out of the saddle as gracefully as I could. Galen's spell to relieve my saddle soreness must've still been in effect, as I didn't have a problem this time.

I cleared my throat. Kajari glanced at me, questioningly. I nodded at Shaw.

"Ah." Kajari turned to the boy and said, "Have plenty of food and water brought out for the griffin. He is tired from a long run."

The boy vanished in the darkness. Kajari unrolled the scroll, scanning it impatiently for a minute. He shook his head ruefully as Galen came to join us, dabbing at one sweaty brow with a white kerchief.

"Court functionaries." Kajari all but spat the words. "They wish to meet with me and the Wizard. More trivial palace nonsense."

"Be that as it may, know that I stand ready, Lord Regent," Galen said.

"Go sate their hunger for our company for a few minutes. I need

to escort Lady Chrissie to Parliament."

I opened my mouth to speak about that title thing again, but my voice was drowned out by the sound of flesh being ripped from bone. On the lawn beside me, the palace servants had set out a trough of water and a tray with an entire roast leg of lamb. Shaw tore into the meat, shredding it into gobbets with his beak.

"He seems content, for now," Kajari observed. "Let us go see if Parliament is in a similar mood."

We crossed the expanse of the courtyard, and then turned the corner beyond one of the palace's massive dunce-cap towers. Before us lay a singularly odd-looking three story building, sheer-sided and windowless. From what I could tell, it wasn't made of the same gray stone that made up most of the buildings in Andeluvia. An A-frame wooden roof almost seemed to float above the walls, as it was propped up ten feet higher on nothing more than a series of thick timber posts.

Strangest of all, there were no torches here. Only metal braziers holding handfuls of dimly fluorescent stone. The light given off was more green-white than red, and it took more time for the eye to adjust.

Kajari strode right up to the doors. Like the rest of the doors in the palace, the iron-banded wood was in the shape of a high pointed arch. The Duke threw the doors open without so much as a knock, as if we were expected.

I looked inside. For a moment, I stood dumbfounded, unable to speak.

My voice came out in a strange, high pitch. "This…is your legislature?"

"Of course it is." Kajari looked at me quizzically. "What else did you expect a Parliament to be?"

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Chapter Fifteen

Ever since I'd woken up to a handsome centaur's ministrations, I'd been trying to cope with things that made my head spin. So far, so good. But when Duke Kajari threw open the doors to the 'Parliament', the fact I was in a fantasy world hit home with a *bang*.

Centaurs and griffins were far, far outside my experience. So I guess my mind must've stuck them in the 'Heraldic Beings Come to Life' category. But as I stepped into the Parliament building, the Lord Regent at my side, my mind reeled at trying to reconcile the familiar with the utterly alien.

The interior resembled a Greek-style amphitheater at a particularly well-endowed college. Instead of oval tracks of benches, long rows of drafting tables ran the circumference of the room. Iron bars, about as thick around as my wrist, were mounted horizontally behind the tables. I could immediately see why. To a legislator, that bar was the equivalent of a lounge chair.

More than a hundred pairs of bright yellow eyes focused on me, their huge pupils dilating and adjusting like camera lenses. The *skritch-skritch* sound of a score of quill pens on parchment halted, to be followed by the *clack* of talons as bodies shifted to turn in my direction. Silence for a moment. My nostrils registered the soft scent of feathers, old parchment, and…*pastry?*

And then, a series of soft 'hoo!' sounds, bobbing heads and ruffled wings.

Well, Kajari had been right after all. What had I expected a parliament to be but a group of owls? The Duke grinned a little as he watched my brain try to sort out the sight of dozens of owls, some gripping quill pens in a talon as they wrote, standing one-legged on their iron perches. Others flitted silently into the dim, lofty reaches above, leaving and re-entering through the wide gap between the top of the walls and the roof.

One of the owls fluttered down and landed before us. He—she?—

looked like a jumbo-sized cousin of a Great Horned Owl. When my family had lived in Pike County, the horned owls that nested in our back yard had been at most the size of a large chicken. Not these birds. The tufted horn feathers of the one that stood before us came fully up to my waist.

"The sun is down and the night wind is up, Lord Regent. Felicitations, felicitations!" the owl said, bobbing her head and spreading her wings. I was pretty sure that I had the gender right. For instance, Shaw had a masculine gruffness to his archaic accent. This owl's voice sounded prim and proper, like a nun fresh out of a convent.

"I return those felicitations, Xandra," Kajari said, bowing slightly. "One hopes for breeze beneath each wing, prey beneath each shrub."

Xandra let out a couple of pleased 'hoo!' sounds, then said, "So many events, drowned out by the rays of sun. We only see those who ride here, after. Equitation in service of she-from-another-world. One could but wonder at those great and wondrous happenings."

I blinked. Kajari hadn't been kidding about the legislators being a little strange. Well, strange in ways beyond being giant owls. Ones who talked. And wrote tax code on the side.

But I'd sat in on more than a few Homicide investigations. I'd interviewed witnesses, good, honest people, who feared retaliation by a gang, or a tong, or a family member. They'd often talk 'around' a subject in order to give me the information I wanted. If I read Xandra and Kajari's exchange right, then this was the normal way Parliamentarians spoke.

So many events, drowned out by the rays of sun. Well, owls normally slept in the daytime, when the sun was up. *We only see those who ride here, after…One could but wonder at those great and wondrous happenings.* The owl eyes hadn't appeared until evening, after we'd seen off the centaurs. So unless I missed my guess, Xandra seemed to be saying: *What happened while we were asleep? It seemed important. We'd really like to know.*

Kajari's next words bore my guess out. "One missed a near-crossing of swords. Of centaur and human. She-from-another-world

came to view the place of Benedict's last breath. She-from-another-world turned aside the blades, and now vouches for the centaurs."

"Near misses! Turned blades! One wonders about vouching for the centaurs. Quite the tangle of elements, so many variables. A mystery how one could see through such a bramble."

In other words, "Why does Miss She-From-Another-World think the centaurs are innocent?" Time for Dayna Chrissie to step up again.

"Um, hello," I said. Xandra cocked her head at me. Like with Shaw, I wasn't quite sure how to read her expression. But at least it didn't seem hostile. "I'm Dayna, she-from-another-world. I…that is, one sees through claims of truth or false with evidence and logic. No logic exists for the centaur king to want to end Benedict's life."

"And one has seen evidence as well?"

Nothing got by this bird. "Evidence has not pointed true, not yet. It has been collected. One must seek the truth from it."

"It is all as we thought. Come! Join us at the center table for breaking-of-the-fast. The Albess wishes to see you." And with that, Xandra spread her wings. With a silent pair of beats, she took to the air and vanished into the gloom.

"I'm impressed," Kajari said, inclining his head towards me. "Apparently, your mind can unravel their speech. It's a challenge from time to time."

"You should listen to some of the city bureaucrats I have to work with," I replied, though I couldn't help but smile a little. It was nice to impress Kajari without stepping on his toes or calling him a murder suspect, for a change.

"Indeed!" He lay a warm hand on my arm for a moment, almost protectively. "Enjoy your breakfast with our legislators. I must go rescue our Wizard from the demands of the court. I will return shortly."

"I'm sure I can keep myself entertained with the, ah, Parliament."

"Of that I have no doubt. Dining with Albess Thea is an honor. She's something of a holy figure in Andeluvia." Kajari leaned in and spoke quietly, under his breath. "I've found that she can be a little touchy. Take care not to offend her."

With that sobering bit of advice, Kajari turned and strode off into the deepening dusk of the evening. I swallowed hard, and then walked further into the gloomy interior of the room. The air felt pleasantly cool and slightly moist, much like the atmosphere inside a large cavern. I realized with a start that the place reminded me, appropriately perhaps, of a well-kept cave.

My mouth watered as once again, I smelled the incongruous scent of freshly baked puff pastry. The light level increased as I drew towards the center of the room. I blinked in surprise as I found myself at one end of a long wooden table, piled high with food. Silver platters coddled stacks of baked goods, drizzled with gravy, frosting, or dabs of sugar. Plump tureens held dark, steaming stews or something like pigs-in-a-blanket smothered in a Day-Glo colored glaze.

The chairs on both sides of the table had a little towel-rack shaped bar hung over the back. The avians would swoop in to perch on whatever chair was close to the delicacy of their choosing, snatch a selection, and then wolf it down owlishly. It was fascinating to watch, but I heard someone call my name down towards the other end of the table.

“It is she, it is she,” I heard Xandra’s voice say, as I drew near. Her talons clutched the chair bar and she bobbed her head excitedly. She extended a wing towards me, beckoning, while indicating the owl perched next to her with the other. “One shall exchange familiarities. Dayna-of-another-world, now meet our Head of Parliament. One wishes to introduce Thea, the Albess.”

“I am honored, Albess Thea,” I said simply.

Duke Kajari had warned me not to offend the Albess. But he hadn’t specified any manners or protocol. So I politely inclined my head, the way I’d seen Kajari do. It was tougher to do than I’d expected.

The Albess’ dignified stance upon her perch reminded me of the stone lions one could find by the steps of a courthouse. Her eyes were the color of weak lemonade, and her pupils contained the milky cloud of early cataracts. But those eyes fixed on me with laser-like intensity. Her stern gaze filled me with anxiety, as if she were contemplating

how a chunk of my earlobe would taste.

But that feeling dissipated with Thea's first words.

"My dear child, the one who should be honored is I. A long way round you have come to us, as we say." The Albess' warm, summery voice made her sound like the kind of woman Walt Disney would cast as the fairy godmother or the enchanted teapot. "Dark be the reasons for your visit, but a joy it is to see you."

"I'll do my best to uncover the one who brought you such sadness," I said. Thea bobbed her head and ruffled her pretty feathers. Where Xandra and the other owls were mottled brown and black, Thea's plumage had the pure creamy orange shade of a Dreamsicle.

"One must need alone-time whence speaking to she-from-another-world," the Albess said to Xandra. The younger owl bobbed her head, and then took flight. A *clack* as Thea shifted her perch. She nodded towards the table. "You have not eaten since arrival, so I observe. Please, partake. Enjoy."

My stomach rumbled in agreement. I'd been on the run since I woke up in Benedict's palace, and had never even thought of sustenance. I looked out eagerly over the sea of stews and pastries.

"I'm not sure what to try," I said, as I picked up an empty plate. "There's so much to choose from."

"Oh, the court of Benedict makes all this for us, freshly killed each evening," Thea said approvingly. She jabbed a talon at various dishes, pointing out some of her favorites with obvious relish. "Over here is stewed mouse. Next to it is grilled mouse in goat's milk gravy. Filleted mouse in clotted cream. Pan fried mouse, mouse with beets and turnips, chunked mouse in mint jelly…"

My stomach rumbled again, this time firmly not in agreement.

"And that's just the first course," Thea continued. "We also have mouse turnovers, mouse scrapple, mouse cobbler, mouse blood pudding—"

"Do you have…" My voice trailed off, desperately trying to heed Duke Kajari's warning about Thea's touchiness.

"Yes?"

"Anything without…quite so much 'mouse' in it?"

The Albess pondered the question. She nodded at a nearby raised platter, which held a kind of pie. Sinister-looking lumps jutted out from the glazed top. “Well, there is broiled mouse tart. There’s not *much* mouse in that.”

“I’ll try it,” I said. I found some silverware at the edge of the table, cut myself a slice big enough to look like I was enjoying the bounty of Thea’s table, and then speared a piece with a fork. The Albess watched me curiously as I popped it in my mouth.

All right. I know, I’m the kind of woman who’s tolerated enough gross stuff to actually formulate a Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending). And I’ve even been ornery enough to use that tolerance to gross other people out, to get them clear of my work zone.

Apparently, all that negative karma I’d earned wasn’t going to wait until the next life to get me.

The texture hit me first. At first gooey, mushy. Overcooked peas held together by strings of melted caramel and butter. Followed by the chewy, leathery feel of the meat chunks. The snap of tiny bones in my mouth, which made me think of pork cracklings. As for the taste…my poor, abused tongue picked up sautéed onion, something starchy like a potato, diced apples, and cider vinegar.

Oh, yes, and broiled mouse. Can’t forget the mouse.

“In-ter-esting,” I said. I suppressed a shudder as I swallowed. “How much mouse is in this, exactly?”

“Oh, four or five.” Thea considered for a moment. “Rather a lot, really.”

I fully intended to go for a second bite, but my stomach made a little lurch in protest. Instead, my hands sought and found a carafe of water. I chugged the contents down in an unladylike manner. I figured that I could probably convince the Albess that this was the way polite society drank in my world.

“Now that you’ve had a bite,” Thea said, apparently unperturbed by my poor manners, “the right person you are, to find the one that struck the King down. I believe you need one last thing to succeed. And I wish to share what it is with you.”

“I’m all ears, Albess Thea.”

“Such a fine expression! All ears!” Thea made a ‘hoo!’ and added, “You must leave the palace this very night. For what you lack is a being of fey magic. You need one of the *fayleene*.”

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Chapter Sixteen

I still had problems reading the expressions of the Albess and her fellow owls. But this time, my guess was that Thea enjoyed the puzzled look that crossed my face. She deftly hooked a set of her talons around the handle of a specially shaped spoon. Balancing easily on one leg, she used the other to take heaping spoonfuls of mouse stew from a tureen set next to her perch.

"All right, I'll bite," I said. "I don't know what 'fey' magic is, to start with."

Thea let out a series of hoots that made up an owlish chuckle. "My laughter is not in your direction," she said apologetically. "But fey magic should be something every world should know about, even yours."

I shook my head, so she continued.

"Men think 'fey' means 'fairy'. It means both less and more. Magic it is, but of the fallow field, of the evergreen forest, of the stillness before the sun rises. The fayleene, who live in the woods to the north, are made of this magic."

"And how will a 'Fay-leene' help my investigation?"

"Not directly help, I think. But indirectly, yes. For centuries, no one with a fayleene on their side has ever failed at a task, or lost a battle. They bring luck. I believe in their luck because their magic is subtle. Subtle and potent."

"So I'm supposed to search for one of these…magic fairy types to join me."

Thea ruffled her feathers, and said, with a touch of smugness, "fayleene can cross a meadow without shaking free a single drop of dew, so stealthy are they. If they do not wish to be found, they are not. But I have asked them to aid you."

"And they said yes?"

Thea blinked. "As point of fact, no. But they did not refuse, which is promising, for them. They asked to see you, as soon as is practical."

I considered this. I couldn't say that I was looking forward to another long ride in search of some Tinker Bell pixie. I already felt a little ragged around the edges. And in need of a relaxing hot soak in a tub. One with enough bath salt in it to make the Dead Sea look like a freshwater pond.

"I see you are tired," Thea said, sympathetically. I opened my mouth to protest, but she gently tapped my shoulder with one wing. "I hear it in your voice. Fatigue and I have become longtime, if not welcome friends."

"I hope you haven't been ill, Albess."

"I shoulder my burden of years, as all do. I find it hard to fly straight anymore. My vision dims. Many of my issues reside deep in my gut, I think."

"Perhaps a little too much mouse in the diet?" I inquired politely.

"No, dear. My problems involve the passing of water. Until recently, some of our own nobles at court had similar issues. Owls and humans remedy these problems the same way, with juniper berries brought down from the mountains."

Thea sighed, and then leaned forward on her perch. Her voice took on a dreamy aspect as she added, "One should know that juniper berries are more than a cure-all for poor, old owls. They help one to nose out the truth. To help one go beyond the lids that can close. To shut out the lies."

I frowned, not sure what to make of those last words. Did I detect a touch of senility? Or the cadence of a riddle? But before I could speak, a pair of owls appeared from out of the darkness. They settled on a nearby perch with a half-dozen quiet wing beats. I recognized one as Xandra.

"Such an evening!" Xandra said, "So many guests, so many indeed. Multitudinous, one thinks."

"One thinks also that company attracts like, and like attracts company," the new owl added.

With a start, I realized that I hadn't had to decipher most of Thea's speech, but with these two, my brain had to re-engage. The best I could tell, they meant that more people were on the way, and they

had something to do with me.

"One can grasp these facts with but a single talon," Thea replied. "See you to your business, allow one to hostess properly."

The owls bowed and fluttered off. I heard the door to the Parliament building open with the harsh creak of hinges in desperate need of oiling. The owls at their writing set up a new chorus of excited 'hoos!' as two forms picked their way through the dimly lit room and towards the table. As they drew into the light, I made out the Duke's proud silhouette first. Galen's tall equine frame came next. The centaur wore a saddle bag and a sword in a leather scabbard around the equine portion of his body.

"My sincere apologies for disturbing you, Albess," Duke Kajari said.

"One takes apologies like sleet or hail," Thea said, a little frostily, I thought. "Accepted, but hardly welcomed with joy. What sets one's brow ill-at-ease?"

"My brow sets ill-at-ease, yes. The stable master tells me that the Head of Parliament…needs a fast horse. Albess, have you taken up riding on the sly?"

"Riding? One scoffs at the idea of an old hen clinging to the back of a saddle!" Thea snapped her beak in the air with a *clack*. "One needs a horse for she-from-another-world. To travel to the Fayleene Woods this very night."

Duke Kajari stared at her for a moment. "Preposterous!"

"One cannot help but agree, Lord Regent. But for the fact that all now live in 'preposterous' times. The measures taken must match the need."

"Since I am formally attached to Dayna's investigation, I have also prepared to travel whence forth," Galen added.

Kajari started to object, but seemed to think better of it. He nodded, resignedly, and then said, "Very well. I shall have your mount brought here as soon as possible." He inclined his head towards me with a little bow. "Travel safe. I look forward to your return. And the tale of your journey to find one of the fey folk."

With his characteristic brusqueness, Kajari did not wait for my

reply. Instead, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room. Thea watched him leave, her expression unreadable.

"One expected more argument," the Albess said. She spread her wings, and then added, "It surprises, but one must echo his words. Travel fast, but safe."

Thea took to the air unsteadily, but with a few wing beats she soared out of sight. The pair of abrupt departures startled me. I looked questioningly at Galen, but he was staring at the barely-eaten remnants of my dinner on its plate.

"Intriguing," said Galen. "This looks and smells like mouse tart."

"That's what it is," I said ruefully.

The centaur's hooves clattered as he made a shudder. "Disgusting."

We went outside, where the glow of the moon shone through the fleecy scud of gathering clouds. The same page boy I'd seen before, still decked out in robin's egg blue, waited patiently outside the Parliament building. He held the reins of yet another white horse, one who nickered and looked askance at the low-slung frame of the griffin that paced nearby.

"Thou hast made the strange request of a second ride this night," Shaw observed tiredly. "Yet thou art my liege in this endeavor, Dayna. I shall follow."

"Nay, brave griffin." Galen said firmly.

"Thou sayest nay, or neigh, centaur?"

"If Dayna accepts my counsel, thou should not follow us this night." Galen said, lowering his voice. He threw me a meaningful glance. "I suspect treacherous thoughts here. Thoughts that a griffin might bring within earshot."

"I trust your counsel," I said, watching Galen carefully. "Shaw, if you would…I mean, if thou would-est—"

"Wouldst," the centaur supplied.

"Thanks. If thou wouldst, might you take this task?"

"I shall, right away. If there be treachery here, mayhap I can root it out." He turned and slunk off into the shadows. I took the reins of my horse from the page, who bowed and then followed the griffin. I

looked at Galen and raised an eyebrow in question.

"I appreciate you doing that, Dayna," he said. "I did hear grumblings among the assembled nobles at court. Behnaz and Vazura showed up to denounce you."

"Great," I said, "More good news."

"You speak truly. But the reason I brought it up is the incontrovertible fact that our leonine companion is old, for a griffin."

I fought to keep my face impassive. Galen's words sounded much like what Vazura had said about Shaw. Too much.

"He seems okay to me, Galen."

"You observed how out of breath he was upon arriving here," Galen pointed out. "I know the way to the woods of the fayleene. It is not far, but it is a more rugged road. Running hence and back will certainly deplete his strength, and may possibly hurt him."

"I'd wondered about that on our trip back here from the Grove of the Willows. Couldn't Shaw have kept up more easily by flying?"

"That strikes at the heart of the matter, Dayna. Griffins are not owls, despite being feathered kin. They cannot see well at night to begin with. Due to his age…"

I nodded. "Yeah, I get it. Going in the dark is a bad idea, for him. Flying could be a deadly one."

"That said, I will miss his company on the road. A griffin's strength and courage is always welcome."

"Me too. But at least I get to share the ride with my favorite Wizard." I clambered into the saddle, as awkwardly as ever, and then gripped the reins firmly in hand. "Let's get going, these fairy types aren't going to wait all night."

"Halt!" a man's gruff shout came from the darkness ahead.

"Now what?" I grumbled. A shadowy figure strode up before us. He held up a staff, which glowed menacingly with a blood-red light at the tip.

"Heed me, blasphemer! Heed my words, ere you perish," the voice continued. "I see your future as plain as sun on the fields! Gruesome death awaits you the moment you step foot outside Benedict's walls!"

The figure stepped into the courtyard as the moon came out from

behind a cloud. The wan light threw his wizened face into sharp relief and shaded his age-spotted skin bleak shades of white and brown. It also turned his long-sleeved tunic a comical hue of bright indigo, as if he'd colored it with Crayola crayons.

I groaned. I recognized him from when I'd first arrived in Andeluvia.

"Master Seer Zenos," Galen said. "Again with the predictions of catastrophe. Perchance, could there be someone else you could annoy tonight?"

"My business isn't with you, horse-man," Zenos sniffed. "This Dayna Chrissie woman, she disrespects the Guild of Soothsayers with her very presence!"

I rolled my eyes. "You know, Zenos, you don't have to hide your feelings. If you want to join the Dayna Chrissie fan club, there's still a lot of open seats."

"Laugh while you can! I see death in your future!" Zenos threw his head back. His halo of white hair sort of fluffed out like a spill of talcum powder.

"I would worry about your pronouncements," Galen said dryly, "if it weren't the fact that you predict death in everyone's future. Lord Illagan finally passed away of old age last week, forty years after you predicted his doom."

"See? I tell you, centaur, I am never wrong. Never!"

"Right," I said flatly. "I'll take it under advisement, Master Seer."

I gave my mount a nudge with my heels. The horse, perhaps sensing my need to get away from the escapee from the loony bin, moved off at a sharp trot. Galen followed at my side, and we left the palace gate behind in a cloud of dust.

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Chapter Seventeen

Galen and I worked our way through the town blocks again. Though the streets were nearly empty, many of the houses were cheerily lit from inside. At regular intervals, Benedict's realm had put out a kind of streetlamp. Tall braziers, similar to the kind at the Parliament building, held clumps of glowing stones in a globe of wire mesh. The light gave the cobblestones a luminous sheen, as if the street itself lay underwater.

As the town fell behind us, Galen indicated that we should take a fork off to the north. This time, the road turned to packed dirt more quickly. The fitful moonlight illuminated a series of rolling hills dotted with gnarled trees. The scent of pine filled my nose, though with a distinctly alien tinge of something like peppermint.

"I must tender apologies for our Master Seer," Galen said. "His predictions can be unsettling, and worse, disrespectful."

"I can't blame him, I guess," I replied. "My presence here is a sort of poke in the eye to a seer. Nobody likes a threat to their job."

The Wizard chuckled. "Indeed."

"I am curious, though. Was he serious about never being wrong?"

"You were listening, perhaps, when I mentioned the case of Lord Illagan?"

"The one who died, forty years after the prediction of his demise."

"Death did, finally, come for the man, so give Zenos that one. In my case, I strongly doubt his visions will come true."

"Now I'm curious. Can you share?" Of course, the Dayna Chrissie of twenty-four hours ago didn't believe in this stuff. But lately, in the company of magical people and creatures, I found myself a lot more willing to suspend disbelief.

"Zenos said that I would ascend to the throne of the Centaur Realm."

"Really?" I stopped for a moment. "That's…not good news, is it? You said that a centaur can only do that when he defeats the current

King in combat."

"Correct. But I have no desire for the throne. Despite our differences, I still wish no harm to my sire. And finally, I have no craving for death." Galen sighed. "Zenos also said that I would only hold the throne for a few days."

"Meaning that someone else will take it from you."

We rode in silence for another few minutes. The last lights of the houses faded in the distance. The clouds fell away from the moon, but a dense, knee-high fog took its place.

The strange, gnarled trees grew more thickly here, making a proper forest. The peppermint smell grew in intensity, making my tongue tingle. My mind cast back to Thea's words and phrases, prompting me to speak again.

"Galen, how well do you know the Albess, Thea?"

"Moderately. Conversing with her, or any owl…it is difficult. Like playing pick-up-sticks with forehooves instead of fingers. It can be done, but it is tiresome after a while. They think in terms of the group, so they never use words like 'I'."

That wasn't quite true, I realized with a start. Xandra certainly fit Galen's description. Albess Thea, on the other hand…the way she spoke with me had been distinctly different. But then, she'd gone back to speaking 'owlish' when Galen and Kajari arrived unexpectedly. Why?

"I'd been wondering," I said, "whether the Albess has any gift of prophecy, understanding of magic. She seemed adamant that we visit the fayleene, to get their help."

"I've never heard of the Albess scrying. The mere mention of such a thing would make Zenos foam at the mouth. I'll venture that she's acquired a deep understanding of the way magic works, though."

"Could she, or anyone else in the palace, be able to cast spells?" Galen frowned as we cantered on, up and down along long, forested switchbacks. "Vazura said that the first sign of trouble in the grove was when his patrol's magic detectors went off. They also heard the sounds of magic weapons, such as a staff that casts 'fire bolts'. And I still think our suspect can cross between our worlds."

“I truly doubt that anyone in Andeluvia with access to Benedict had the power to do these things,” Galen stated. His voice betrayed a slight irritation. “Greater acts of magic, like crossing between worlds, require years of training.”

“That may be. Of course, all that does is cast more suspicion on you, as the resident wizard.”

“You speak truly.” Galen held up a hand, and we slowed to a stop.

All around us, the trees hung as still and thick as the ground fog. Loops of something like Spanish moss hung from the low branches like sinister green garrotes. Galen cocked his head, listening intently. At the very bottom of the sound scale, I thought I heard a distant thudding or tremble through the ground.

“We draw nigh to the Fayleene Woods,” Galen said, his voice just above a whisper. “The night sounds are strange, distant. I feel that they are here, but…”

“Should we call to them?”

Galen nodded. He cupped his hands to his mouth, and then shouted a phrase in a liquid, flowing tongue. “*Ai hóigh! Maor coille feighil, fia fionn!*”

Silence. Again, for a moment I thought I heard a distant sound. As if it came from a boiler, or a steam engine in mid-vent, somewhere a couple valleys over. I slowly dismounted. I absently massaged my thigh muscles. Galen’s magic or no, I’d started to get the prickles of pins and needles in my legs again.

The Wizard repeated his call. He made a frustrated snort. “I spoke to them in their Old Tongue. Never before have they refused to reply __”

“We heard you, Wizard. We heard your breath as you crested the first rise.”

A murmur of voices came from the mist around us. Fluid, musical voices, with the hint of an accent. It came across as vaguely Gaelic to my ear. And the fayleene didn’t sound all that pleased with us.

“*Ad hóigh*, fayleene.” Galen indicated me with the sweep of his stout arm. “I have brought you a visitor from another world.”

“We know. The Albess told of this.”

A flicker of movement in the mist. Or were my eyes playing tricks? I swore that I'd seen the hint of long, thin, spidery legs. Something with more than two legs, anyway.

I shuddered. Yeah, with my luck, I wasn't going to be drawing fey folk that looked like leaf-clad pixies from *Fantasia*. For chrissake, what if the fayleene were giant spiders? Just the perfect thing to cap off a lovely evening.

"We demand to know something, Wizard!" The voice got a little higher pitched, sharper. "Why have you drawn treachery to us?"

"Treachery? Fey folk, I have always been a friend!" Galen protested. "I would never knowingly do such a thing!"

A rapid babble of discussion. Again, I caught a glimpse of something in the fog. It was hard to make out in the moonlight. Splotches of white against some darker surface.

I smelled nothing but the wet embrace of mist. Until a stray breeze all but shoved the scent of a freshly struck match up one nostril.

My horse squealed in fear. The reins tore free from my grip as it bolted.

"If you did not," the fayleene voice said, "then someone has sent dragons after you, as well as us. 'Ware! They come upon us with claws and flame!"

Galen's face went ashen as he glanced over his shoulder. Without turning away, he groped for the sword that hung at his side. To my amazement, he reversed his grip on it, offering it hilt-first to me.

I took it, more out of surprise than anything else. I hadn't held a sword since an outing with the Renaissance Fair people in my college days. And those weapons were little more than glorified stage props.

This damned thing looked all too real, bright and scalpel-sharp.

"Galen!" I objected, "I don't know how to use this effing thing!"

"Then our present situation would be a superb time to learn," he replied. He pivoted around, eyes intent on something approaching us. "Dayna…*get down!*"

My skin prickled as I heard a not-so-distant bellow.

Mama Chrissie didn't raise fools for daughters, so I listened to

what my wizard friend said. I threw myself upon the moist, misty earth. A ghastly, reptilian roar filled the night air.

I tried to make my spine telescope into my stomach.

Galen danced to one side. A rush of air rippled above me, around me. Something with the wingspan of a Piper Cub shot overhead and past.

I heard the pulse of giant, leathery wings. Saw something ghastly dive towards the tree line. It stooped like a hawk. A terrible scream of triumph mixed with the shriek of my horse.

The thing turned, hovered in mid-air. I saw it clearly now.

Think of the velociraptors you've seen on the science channel's 'Dinosaur Week'. Double the size, buff it out. Give it wings, a neck like a snake, and a pair of backwards-facing horns that jutted from its skull like spears.

Not scary enough? Dip its scales in paint the color of drying blood.

The dragon bent its neck and snatched the horse from where it gripped the poor animal in its talons. Saw-toothed jaws shook back and forth. The terrible sound of teeth ripping muscle.

The *crack* of bone.

My horse stopped squealing.

Dull thuds of Galen's hooves on mossy ground.

I turned my head, saw a second dragon appear from the trees off on the centaur's side. This one sported yellow stripes down the sides and an extra pair of horns. As if some hot-rodding Angeleno had decided to trick out the basic draconian design.

This dragon didn't waste time with a roar. It made an ungracious sound like a belch. Then it sent a jet of fire at the Wizard.

Galen moved his hand down in a single, smooth motion. The stream of flame shot off to one side. The stink of brimstone. The stench of menthol paste on a red-hot griddle rose from the burning trees.

The centaur dug his hooves into the soft turf. He pointed at the beast.

"*Hóski, seydir!*"

Blue lightning ran down Galen's arm. Like a high voltage spark,

the bolt leaped from the tip of his finger to the dragon's nose.

A *bang!* and the reptile flew over backwards into the trees. It righted itself, hissing like a seriously pissed bulldozer, and came at the Wizard again.

Off to the other side, the sounds of chewing stopped as the first dragon finished swallowing what remained of my mount. A snake-like forked tongue flicked out, cleaning its jaws.

The thing's glassy green cat-eyes simply skipped over me. Instead, they fixed on the larger, more edible target. The dragon shifted to all fours, getting ready to spring at Galen's exposed back.

Oh, damn.

Damn, damn, and toss in another damn for good measure.

I got to my feet. Smudges of mud and wet moss covered the front of my violet top and what had been my not-too-badly wrinkled Ann Taylor pants. I made a laughable dragon slayer. I don't think even the best fantasy artist could've made a cheesecake warrior princess picture out of it.

I held the sword up. The tip wavered as my hand shook. I grabbed the hilt with both hands to steady it.

What in God's name was I doing?

That's when my mind did one of its weird little *clicks*.

I'd mostly been focused on the business end of the dragons. The teeth, the horns, the claws. But my brain had registered a little gleam from each of the dragons' left forearms.

I squinted, and then made out a thick bronze circlet, inscribed with runes.

These weren't wild creatures. They *belonged* to someone. Someone who wanted me and Galen dead.

And that finally managed to piss me off.

Big time.

I lowered my sword as I realized what I had to do next.

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Chapter Eighteen

It's funny how certain life events put things in perspective.

I'd had some rough times, working for the M.E.'s office back in Los Angeles. Times where I was sure that things couldn't get any worse. Yeah, that sort of took a back seat to being sandwiched in between two giant reptiles with serious attitude problems.

Galen seemed to be holding his own when it came to the racing-stripe dragon, even though it breathed fire. But if I didn't do something, the remaining one would come in on his blind side.

Tear him apart, the way it did to my horse.

The Wizard had been kind enough to lend me a sword. That said, I wasn't about to charge into battle. I'd probably end up as dragon kibble in the process.

I lowered my weapon, holding it in one hand as I knelt. With my other hand, I groped around in the mist and found a rock.

Now I was in business.

Here's a bit of Dayna-trivia I never thought would come in handy. Back in Pike County Elementary, there were lots of boys dumb enough to bet that I couldn't skip a stone off the pond a dozen times or more. I won more than a few lunches that way.

Point being: I knew how to sling a stone.

The red dragon shifted to a crouch, coiling its muscles to spring. That's when it got a stone in the eye, courtesy of yours truly. It raised its head and let out a roar of agony.

Galen side-stepped another jet of fire with an agility that any earthly equine would have envied. He gestured, shouted. Blue sparks blasted the second dragon back again.

The centaur risked a glance back at me. Sweat poured from his forehead.

"Are you mad?" he gasped, "These foes are beyond you! Run!"

"If I don't draw this one's attention, you'll be torn to pieces," I shot back. "They've got bracelets or something on their left foreleg.

That tell you anything?"

"Bracelets? But that would mean…" His expression darkened. Galen slid right past fear and into anger, just as I had done. "That would mean I have something to work with."

The Wizard spoke a new phrase and jabbed his hand in the direction of the fire-breather. Instead of a crackle of energy, I heard the hiss of an electric hot plate. The reptile's bracelet glowed white hot. Smoke began to rise from its foreleg. It fell over, let out a spine-tingling yowl. Its spiked tail thrashed the trees around it to kindling.

The dragon I'd beaned with the stone finished its bellowing. A white scuff mark marred the clear scale that covered its eye. It shifted to focus on me with a crocodilian snarl.

I ran.

A triumphant shriek as it pursued me. I dashed through the narrowest openings I could find in the tangled mass of woodland. All around us, the forest had been set ablaze.

Flames licked at my sleeve as I ducked through a mass of burning vines. Smoke mixed with the ground mist. The reflection from the fire made it look as if I were running through molten lava.

I kept seeing lithe shapes in the murky light. Shapes that bounded away, kept to the shadows as I ran past. One shape broke away and ran next to me for a moment.

I thought I heard a hoof-like patter. But that couldn't be. I'd left Galen far behind.

"Keep on!" said a voice. The Gaelic-tinged voice sounded like a young man's this time. "I can distract him, you keep going!"

Jaws snapped. A nearby branch shattered.

I suppressed a scream and kept moving forward. Adrenaline surged into my veins. Made my sweat run cold like beads of ice down my neck.

I heard the voice again, this time at my back. This time it was taunting.

"Oh, am I too nimble for you? How very sad."

An answering roar of frustration.

I pushed myself to run faster. My lungs burned. The entire world

seemed to be on fire.

Smoke blurred my vision. Forced itself down my windpipe. Burning, burning like battery acid.

"Go left!" the voice said to me. "Down and to your left!"

I hesitated. Off that way, two massive trees had fallen together. Leaning against each other. As if embracing to the last.

The A-shaped opening between them smoldered fitfully, as if it were about to burst into flame.

"Go! Go!"

I launched myself into space.

Trees behind me splintered with a *crash!*

I dove through the opening. I hit the ground rolling.

A sharp pain ran down my elbow like an electric shock. The impact drove my breath from me. I came up into a half-crouch, gasping.

I held my sword out. The blade quivered. Pathetically trying to defend myself from something way, way outside Dayna Chrissie's weight class.

A scarlet-scaled head punched through the opening, crocodile jaws snapping. I cried out and slid backwards on my butt out of reach. The dragon hissed and began to pull its head back through the opening.

That's when the two backwards facing horns got stuck in the wood.

A terrible thrashing from the beast. An earth-shaking bellow of rage followed. Massive talons clawed and striped away chunks of wood from the trees that pinioned the dragon's head. The circlet of bronze around the animal's foreleg clinked against the rough bark.

"It'll be free any moment now," the voice said, from somewhere low and off to my side. "I can tell that it's not your way, but if you don't kill it…"

I wish I could say that some Jiminy-cricket style conscience popped up and told me I shouldn't end that thing's life. I wasn't angry at the dragon anymore. Only the person who sent it. And that last thought—that I might deprive that person of another weapon—sealed

the deal for me.

I held my sword hilt firmly with both hands. Though my lungs burned, somehow I found enough air to scream. I ran at my target, aiming for the scuff mark that I'd put like a little white crosshair on the dragon's eye.

The sharp point of my sword punched through. Green ichor flowed out over my hands, burning. In its last thrash, its death struggle, the reptile flung me away.

I fell back and cracked my head on a hard surface.

Something wet. Ran down the back. Of my neck.

Smell of blood and hot peppermint.

The shape that had run at my side finally came into view. The timing stank. Because my vision blurred as I sank towards blackness.

"Are you all right?"

The question struck me as funny.

Not because I'd just faced off with a Technicolor version of a dinosaur. Nope. It was funny because it came from the being who stood over me. Who'd just helped save me from a dragon.

He looked a hell of a lot like *Bambi*.

The darkness took me and held me close.

The blood trail stood out in a pattern of scarlet splashes against the snow.

Seven years old again. Pike County, Illinois.

I knew that I was back in The Dream. Something about it felt different this time. Something more complete. Something that made me feel expectant, like a teenager waiting for my prom date to arrive.

The cold wind raised goosebumps on my arms, even through the fleece of my pink jacket and mittens. My little wigwam boots followed the blood trail up along the side of our driveway. Up to the garage's side door.

The noises from inside the garage were soft but unmistakably clear. The scrape of flesh on concrete, a grunt, a thud against metal. Then the blubbery, snot-choked sounds of sobbing. Trembling, I opened the door.

Daddy knelt before the white, coffin-shaped freezer. “Oh, God, forgive me, forgive me,” he sobbed. “Dear God, I killed her, I *murdered* her.”

Something like a misshapen nub of bone jutted out of the freezer. I stood on tiptoe, grabbed the top edge, and looked down into the compartment. I stared at what lay inside, more puzzled than ever at Daddy’s reaction.

It was a deer.

A strange looking deer, I supposed, but Daddy had brought deer home from his hunting trips before. I took another look. The deer’s antlers jutted out of the freezer. Okay, that was a little odd, because it was definitely a doe.

The animal was small, with curiously fawn-like white spots on its flank. A thread of half-clotted scarlet dripped from the poor thing’s mouth. A splash of red on its chest showed where the bullet had hit its mark.

“Dayna!” Daddy grabbed me, spun me away from the freezer.

His bright blue eyes, now rimmed in red, were so lost and desperate. It made me want to bawl right then and there, and I didn’t even know what had caused all of this. All I knew was that I loved him and didn’t want to see him in such pain.

“Dayna, listen…something happened today, something I can’t… can’t explain. I…”

His hands twitched as if he were trying to hold something elusive, something that kept slipping out of his grasp.

“What happened? Can you tell me?”

“I was out in the deer blind by the lake. Saw a buck come right out of the tree line. I…God help me, I took the shot. I thought it was clean, but he didn’t drop. Tracked him all the way back here. He didn’t drop until he almost got to our back yard.”

I nodded. That explained the blood trail I’d stumbled across. “But…isn’t he a doe? I mean, she?”

“She’s a doe,” he breathed. “And she’s more. I came up to where the buck fell. Saw then that he was a she.”

“Daddy?”

“I thought she was dead. But as I walked up, she raised her head. Her eyes were so sad, so sad…” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Dayna, she *spoke* to me. She said, ‘Why? Why did you kill me?’. She lay her head back down. She closed her eyes, and she was gone.”

With that admission off his chest, he slumped against the cold side of the freezer, shuddering. He grasped me gently by the shoulders, eyes pleading.

“Dayna, promise me that you’ll never breathe a word of this. Not to anyone, not even your mom.”

I snuggled into his arms, felt his beard hair tickle my cheek as I kissed him.

“I promise, Daddy. I promise.”

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Chapter Nineteen

I opened my eyes. I must've been lying flat on my back, because a pleasant morning sky smiled down on me. Little cotton-ball puffs of cloud dotted the expanse of the cleanest, purest blue I'd ever seen. Which was kind of weird, because judging by the taste in my mouth, I'd spent last night licking the bottom of a dirty ashtray.

That's when memory washed over me in a tidal wave of images. Benedict. Andeluvia. The Centaur Realm. I cursed and let out a groan. I was still in a magical land of talking owls and griffins and dragons. Oh, my.

I'd have traded in that entire medieval menagerie right now, just for a steaming mug of coffee. With a dollop of French vanilla cream, to boot.

Someone spoke from nearby. It was hard to raise my head.

"She's woken from her slumber, Wizard."

Galen appeared at my side, a relieved look on his face and a bag-shaped canteen in his hand. The centaur didn't quite loom over me the way he had when I first woke up in Andeluvia. I realized that I lay on a type of makeshift raised platform.

"Don't bestir yourself quite yet," he cautioned me, as he pulled a stopper out of the bag and held the opening to my mouth. "You acquired a fine collection of bumps, bruises, and burns last night. Enough to keep us all busy."

"Us?" My voice came out in a croak. "Who's 'us'?"

"Hush," he commanded, and tilted the bag.

The sweetest water I'd ever tasted spilled into my mouth, washing away the ash grit. Galen next handed me a little wooden plate. It held half-dozen of what I'd have sworn were boysenberries the size of goose eggs. I gulped down the plate's contents in four greedy handfuls. Whether it was the water or the fruit, I definitely felt stronger, more replenished.

"We're among the fayleene now," Galen explained, as he stowed

both bag and plate back in a pocket of his side-mounted saddlebag. “Between my magic and their herbal lore, your wounds are almost gone already.”

Cautiously, I held up one arm. I flexed the fingers, bent my elbow. No more pain. Some redness was all that remained of the burns on my hand. I cautiously reached behind my head. A tender lump under my scalp, a soft mushy bruise, was all that gave me a twinge. Impressive medicine.

Despite Galen’s protestations, I struggled to a sitting position. I’d lain on a makeshift litter that Galen had propped up in a small clearing, between two chest-high boulders. Probably made it easier for him to work on me. I swung my legs off to the side and let my feet dangle.

That’s when I saw them. Galen and I were surrounded by a herd of white-tailed deer. At least, that’s what they initially looked like. All the fayleene had antlers, even though most of them were does. Compared to earthly deer, they were small. The white spots that dotted their coats enhanced their fawn-like appearance.

The events in The Dream hit me then. Sat on my chest like a dull ache. Only those events weren’t constructs of my imagination. Those memories had actually taken place. Taken place, and then gotten buried by a seven-year-old girl who did what she was asked to do—never tell anyone what had happened.

I shuddered as I recalled everything with crystalline clarity.

One of the older does, who sported a magnificent set of gray-white antlers, stepped forward. Her muzzle worked to form the same, lightly accented voice that Galen and I had first heard upon our arrival.

“Welcome to the Fayleene Woods,” she said, her dark brown eyes as liquid and pretty as her speech. “We are pleased to see you recovered from your injuries. Now, please leave our realm.”

“Why, thank you…” I started to say. But the doe’s blunt words brought me up short. “Um, what?”

“Was I unclear? You are healed now. You should be going.”

Galen made a tsk of disapproval, but the doe ignored him. I got down unsteadily from the litter, but I waved off the centaur’s

proffered hand. I looked the fayleene leader square in her pretty brown eyes.

"That's it? My friend and I almost end up as barbeque on your doorstep, and you're just going to see us off?"

"Ah, I see that I was clear. Yes, you be off now."

"Not until I have my say! Didn't the Albess contact you? Didn't you want to see me?"

"We asked her for more details," the doe replied calmly. "In case you hadn't noticed, the owls are hard to understand. We expected her to answer with a message, not a pair of messengers. Or a pair of forest-torching dragons."

"Look, I'm sorry about your forest, but we didn't exactly ask for that," I explained. "Albess Thea sent us here because I'm trying to find out who murdered the Good King Benedict. She said I needed a fayleene to help me."

"Help you? How? And why? We have no interest in human rulers."

"Ungracious doe," Galen said sternly, "the chaos and evil created by Benedict's murder has already visited you. The two bodies that lie smoking in your woods prove that. You know as well as anyone that the fayleene bring luck. Luck, and the deep, subtle magics that escape even the best of wizards."

"You seek help? You seek luck?" The doe considered, and then said, "There is a one among us who I would bid to go with you. Prince Liam."

With that, one of the smaller fayleene bucks stepped out into the clearing. His fawn-colored, white-spotted coat shone with the sleekness of health. Two things set his appearance apart from the other fayleene.

His right eye held the standard liquid brown, but the left was a bright, emerald green. More evident than his eyes were his antlers. Liam would've made a fine six-point buck, but his left antler simply ended in a jagged stub that projected three inches from his skull.

"If I am so bid, then I will go," Prince Liam said. "I will return once Dayna Chrissie's cause is victorious."

I immediately recognized the voice that had directed me in my flight from the dragon. To my delight, he bent his forelegs and turned his head to give me a sweeping bow.

Right then, the other fayleene burst out in a chorus of strange, bleating laughter. The herd moved out of the clearing in a dull clatter of cloven hoofs. They faded into the woods without so much as a fare-thee-well. But they did not leave without my hearing a few of their choicer comments.

"Return once her cause is victorious? What a laugh."

"You know, Liam just exiled himself."

"His never coming back *would* be an improvement."

Liam remained in his bow, eyes fixed at some point on the ash-covered forest floor. But I saw the little deer's expression. It wasn't a happy one, and he'd set his jaw stubbornly. Galen and I traded a glance. He shrugged. Apparently, I'd have to find out what was going on.

"Prince Liam, get up, please." I said awkwardly. The fayleene did so, turning a curious gaze at each of us in turn. "We, ah, don't stand on much ceremony. You can call me Dayna, and of course, you know Galen. When we return to the palace, you'll meet Shaw, a griffin who also chose to accompany us."

"A griffin? How marvelous. Since I am a prince in name only, refer to me as Liam, if you please."

"In name only?" Galen raised an eyebrow. "I am also in line for the throne of my people—in name only. Might I inquire your circumstance?"

"Since we travel together, yes. There are several fayleene princelings, of which only one is chosen as heir. I shall not be chosen, due to my lack…of a certain quality."

I stretched a kink out of one leg and let out a wry laugh.

"Well then, Liam, welcome to Team Outcast. What quality do your fayleene brethren say you lack?"

Liam looked down and pawed the forest floor.

"Of all the fayleene race, I'm the only one…who is unlucky."

Galen's jaw dropped. I didn't say anything at first, but inwardly, I

groaned.

Just my rotten luck.

The sole damned reason that Thea had sent us out here in the first place was to get someone to change that luck around. We'd lost an entire night and change. We'd been chased and attacked by dragons, survived by the skin of our teeth, and it'd all been for nothing.

That thought stopped me in my tracks.

All for nothing? So sure, are we? Maybe not.

"You know, Liam, I'm not sure I agree with what the other fayleene say."

"It is true," he admitted. The princeling tilted his head, with its grossly asymmetrical antlers, in my direction. "We fayleene do not shed our antlers. I baited a freshly hatched dragon when I was a fawn."

"Princeling, dragonets are nothing to fool with," Galen intoned.

"I know that now. The young dragon gave chase. My horn got tangled in the underbrush. Then broken as I made my escape."

"But you did get away," I pointed out. "And last night, you helped me escape, too. That was very brave."

He sighed. "From your lips, to a doe's soft ears."

"You may have given us another break, as well," I added. "Galen, can we go take a look at the two dragon's bodies?"

"Of course," he replied. Galen led the way downslope, through a portion of the forest that hadn't caught fire. "I must caution you, your usual methods of 'investigation' are out of the question here. We have no gloves that will spare you the burn of a dragon's blood."

"Don't worry, I wasn't exactly planning on performing an autopsy."

We came up to the first dragon's corpse. It stank, but in a completely different way from the typical stages of decomposition I'd been used to. It smelled organic, but sulfurous. Like a pack of struck matches mixed with a handful of charcoal dust.

My sword still protruded from the animal's shattered eye. Careful not to get any more ichor on my hands, I grasped the handle and pulled the weapon free with a liquid *squirp*. To my astonishment, the

blade looked pitted and scarred, as if someone had dunked the metal in a strong acid.

"Now you see why I advised against an autopsy," Galen said, as I tossed the ruined sword away. "But I grasp the thread of your thought. As a matter of fact, I had anticipated it."

He rummaged around in his saddle bag, and then pulled out a pair of large bronze circlets. Though pitted with acid and etched by fire, I recognized each circle as the dragon's bracelets. Liam came over and sniffed at the bronze pieces curiously as I turned them in my hands. They were identical.

On one side, a series of runes had been drawn in such a way as to form a shield-shaped pattern. Next to it were a series of words, written in text that even I could read.

Property of the Royal Stables of King Benedict.

"These were Andeluvian dragons," I breathed. "What Duke Kajari called weapons of last resort."

"Yes," Galen said sadly, "it explained why they were so single-minded in their attempts to destroy us. They've been trained to do this."

"I don't understand this at all," complained Liam. "I thought you were trying to find out who murdered the king of Andeluvia!"

"Apparently, someone doesn't like that. And if they can kill us, or keep us out of action for two more days, they'll win this thing yet," I noted. I rotated one of the circlets to look at the shield shape again, and then tossed it back to Galen. "I don't suppose you can read that rune pattern?"

"As a matter of fact, I can." Galen said. "It's the identity of the person who owned both of these dragons."

"Who?"

My expression darkened as I heard the name.

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Chapter Twenty

Riding a centaur isn't as fun as you might think.

I clung tightly to Galen's shoulders with both hands, trying my best not to get thrown as he galloped along at full speed. Once we left the tangled, half-torched remains of the Fayleene Woods behind, the centaur pushed himself to his limit to get us to the palace as quickly as possible. The wind squeezed my eyes shut, so I just hung on and lost track of the time. Luckily, the fayleene princeling could keep pace with very little effort.

Under Galen's jacket, I could feel the deep throb of his heart. The centaur's scent had elements of sweaty human, sweaty equine. An underlying tinge of exotic spice wafted from the many small pockets that dotted his outfit. My wrists had begun to throb in time with the bone-jarring cadence of Galen's gait when he came to a stop in a clatter of hooves on cobblestone.

"We have returned, Dayna." Galen said, in a tired voice.

I raised my head and felt the creak of stiff muscles in my neck. We'd arrived back on the emerald-green expanse of the palace's inner courtyard. A small crowd of courtiers had already gathered, pointing and gesturing at us. Well, perhaps not at 'us' so much as at Prince Liam. The little fayleene stood calmly, nobly ignoring the excited murmurs of the people around us.

I got down from Galen's broad back with the grace of a small child scrambling down the side of a haystack. I stood cautiously. My legs felt like twin stockings stuffed with cottage cheese.

"So, outworlder, you have come back to us!"

I winced at the loud, self-righteous voice of the Master Seer. I did my best to ignore him as I removed a leather-wrapped bundle from one of Galen's saddlebags. Once I had it tucked under my arm, I faced the old man as he crossed the courtyard to stand before me.

"Yes, I'm back," I said. "Despite your prophecy of doom, too. Maybe you ought to get your crystal ball polished, Master Zenos. It

doesn't seem to be seeing all that clearly."

Galen said nothing, but he added a snort of contempt to accent my words.

"Really?" The seer's ratty blue robe rustled as he jabbed his staff towards us. "So why do you both look singed around the edges?"

"Our scorched aspect comes from defeating a pair of dragons in combat, and sending them back to the pit that spawned them," Galen said tartly.

"Precisely," Zenos said, crossing his arms smugly. "I predicted that gruesome death awaited you once you left Benedict's walls. That's just what happened, is it not? I am never wrong!"

"Yeah, I'm sure that little jingle plays well around the palace," I said, waving him off.

"Ignore me at your peril, woman. I see more pain and strife in your future. I see races in the dark. Treachery. Treason. Blades, beaks, and talons. And at the end of all your struggles? I see the bars of the palace dungeon."

"Enough with your caterwauling, old man!" Galen snapped.

"You cannot deny your fate, future ruler and deposed king of the centaurs!"

Galen's face went beet red. He spluttered something under his breath as his fists clenched into miniature boulders of white-knuckled rock. He took a single step towards Zenos before I moved between the two.

"That's enough!" I said, directing most of my ire at the Seer. "You know, Zenos, in my world, you'd be the guy wandering the streets, wearing a sandwich board that says 'The end of the world is nigh'."

"I do not fear you," he said primly, brandishing his staff in one liver-spotted hand. "I am no wizard, but with a word of command, my staff of stunning would grant you oblivion for the rest of the day!"

"You don't need a staff to do that," I said. "You just keep droning on with your talk of doom. That should do the trick."

With that parting shot, we turned away from the Master Seer and walked towards the palace entrance. I heard a chuckle from Liam as we left Zenos behind, still prophesying dark things for each of us.

“Charming fellow,” remarked the fayleene prince.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “If by ‘charming’, you mean ‘annoying’.”

* * *

This time, a pair of Royal Guardsmen opened the doors into the palace’s meeting hall. With Liam and Galen flanking me, I stepped into the narrow room. The long wooden table that ran the length of the room had a full complement of nattily attired lords and ladies, each engaged in debate. Duke Kajari sat at the end of the table, looking like a bored referee.

The conversations cut off as if someone had flipped a kill switch. People glanced contemptuously at me and the centaur, and then stared in surprised wonder at the fayleene. Kajari stepped into the gap of silence, filling the room with his rich, throaty voice.

“You have fulfilled your mission given to you by the Head of Parliament,” he intoned. “Fortune smiles upon you indeed.”

“The mission given to me by Albess Thea was fulfilled,” I said, raising my voice to make sure it carried down the hall. “Prince Liam of the fayleene joins us in the hunt for Benedict’s murderer.”

Liam stepped forward and gave that same damnably cute bow of his. I waited a moment for that statement to ripple through the crowd. I spotted Captain Vazura’s goateed sneer, which hovered right above the gleam of his uniform’s chain mail vest.

His patron, Lord Behnaz, didn’t seem to be present. But the rotund lord’s hawk-nose wife was. She sat across the table from the Captain, clad in a flowing black gown of some velvet fabric. The sharp glances she threw my way could’ve chipped ice.

“Benedict’s murderer has not been idle,” I said. “On the way to the land of the fayleene, the Galen and I were attacked by a pair of dragons. We had no choice but to slay them, or we would have ended our journey right then and there.”

Boy, if I thought I had the crowd’s attention before, I really had them now. Hushed murmurs ran like lightning along the people at the table. Kajari waited a moment for the voices to die down, and then

spoke.

"This is a serious matter. It has been a score of years since wild dragons dared to attack anyone within the borders of Andeluvia."

"Wild?" I undid the package I carried with one hand. "This wasn't some random encounter. The two dragons came from someone's private stable."

And with that, I tossed the pair of thick bronze circlets out on the table. They made a piercing *clink* as they landed, almost as if the metal had cried out in pain. A collective gasp came from the nobles closest to the circlets. They could easily read the runes as well as Galen had.

"These dragons had been trained for combat from birth. They damn near did their job before Galen and I put them down. And I'd like to know why they carry the markings of Captain Vazura's wing of the Air Cavalry."

A massive rumble of chatter.

"Treachery!"

"Could it be? She's an outworlder!"

"They tried to kill her and the Wizard, too."

Kajari had to raise a hand to restore silence. His eyes glinted like slabs of blue slate as he stared at Vazura. For his part, the Captain looked resigned.

"Captain Vazura, explain yourself!" Kajari demanded. "How is it that a pair of combat trained dragons left your stable? How is it that they happened to attack the woman we summoned, specifically to shed light on the Good King's killer?"

That's when Vazura did what I least expected.

He *shrugged*.

"Accidents happen," he said, supremely unconcerned. "Dragons can escape their tethers when one is inattentive."

Kajari rose to his feet in indignation.

"Accidents happen? Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

Vazura considered for a moment.

"Oops," he added.

The Duke tried to speak, but nothing escaped his lips but an angry

hiss of air. The nobles next to Vazura, save for Lord Behnaz's wife, instinctively recoiled from the Captain. Kajari moved to grope for his sword hilt, but caught himself.

"Guards!" he cried. "Put Captain Vazura in chains!" A pair of Royal Guardsmen appeared at Vazura's side. "Bring him to my chambers!"

I tried to interrupt, but Kajari cut me off. He stabbed his finger my direction.

"I wish to see you in my chambers as well. Immediately." His gaze swiveled like bright blue rifle sights to Liam. "Prince of the Fayleene, forgive this breach of protocol. I bid you go with the Wizard for now, as there is a matter which must be settled at once."

"Of course, Lord Regent," Liam said, bowing still more deeply. "I understand completely."

Just great. Even the fayleene understood more about what was going on than I did.

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Chapter Twenty-One

The Duke's chambers were a mess, even by the standards of your average slumming bachelor. Kajari's main room looked like a wealthy man's study. That is, a few weeks after the maid, butler, and assorted staff had quit and walked out.

An air of neglect extended to every part of the man's quarters. A coat of dust draped itself in a velvet shawl over the furniture. In the next room, I made out a dusty blue coverlet stretched tautly atop a four-poster canopy bed.

A sprawling hardwood desk dominated one wall. Dried-out ink bottles and quill pens perched atop a heap of vellum letters. A silver tool resembling the love child of an egg beater and a spork lay in one far corner. Next to the tool, reeking of evergreen, sat a bundle of rotting stems dotted with puckered-looking blue berries. And huddled in the opposite corner was a glum-looking bag of violet sand.

"Bide a moment," Kajari said. He went to his desk and began to sort through the mass of papers.

As he fumbled through the pile, I gazed out the room's largest window. Outside lay a swath of courtyard, a bushy copse of trees, and the solid mass of the Parliament building.

The scrape of heavy chains on the floor jolted me out of my reverie.

Kajari turned at the sound. He scowled, and then dropped the stack of vellum in one hand back to where he'd picked it up. With his other hand, he peevishly stabbed the letter opener he'd picked up into the desk's soft wood surface.

Captain Vazura stood in the doorway, flanked by a pair of Royal Guards. Shackles clamped to his wrists and ankles left tea-colored stains on his Air Cavalry uniform. The chain that connected his ankle restraints left just enough slack for him to walk at a measured pace. The iron smell of rust followed him into the room like a musty ghost.

To my surprise, Lady Behnaz trailed the two guards. She stood

almost protectively behind the Captain. Her look, pinched at the best of times, didn't benefit from her acerbic expression. The black outfit she wore made her look like a pissed-off vampire bat.

Kajari's expression returned to one that was composed, if not completely at ease. With an obvious effort, he spoke in a civil tone to the cavalry commander.

"Captain," he said, "your flippant tone nearly earned you permanent residence in the dungeon. You have all but admitted to the attempted murder of last night. Now, confess: did you kill Good King Benedict?"

"I did not," Vazura said firmly.

"Then why hinder the investigation?"

The Captain remained silent.

With a snarl, Kajari grabbed Vazura by his armored collar and shook him, the way a large dog might shake prey in its jaws.

"Talk to me, Vazura! What do you know about King Benedict's murder?"

Vazura coughed. Kajari released him. The captain glared at the Lord Regent, and then spat into a dark corner. He gritted his teeth as he spoke.

"I know as little and as much as you."

Kajari raised his arm. He moved to strike the man.

"Lord Regent, wait!" Lady Behnaz deftly stepped around the guards to put herself at Kajari's side. The Duke slowly lowered his clenched fist.

"Milady, you should not be here," Kajari said. "This talk is apt to be dark."

"Dark without need," she shot back. "Vazura has told you he did not murder King Benedict. There's no way to show that he released those dragons."

I snorted. "Your Captain had plenty of motive for murder," I said. "He wasn't exactly apologetic about those dragons that happened to cross my path."

"An unhappy co-incidence," she sniffed.

"And I have a bridge to sell you," I said under my breath. "How

are you so sure of Vazura's innocence?"

Lady Behnaz rounded on me. She got right in my face, boring into me with her fierce, button-black eyes. "Vazura was here at the palace. While my husband is out tending his estates, the good Captain was here, defending our land out of his sense of duty. Which is probably a foreign concept to you, trollop!"

Again with the 'trollop' thing. Captain Vazura himself had called me that, now that I thought about it.

My brain did the *clicking* thing again. Made me sit up and pay attention. Specifically, to the rank, mothball scent that Lady Behnaz's presence had all but shoved under my nostrils.

"You know what's foreign to me?" I said, baring my own feminine fangs. "How a man can defend your lands by sitting on his rump here at court. Or is it really your 'land' that he's tending?"

"I don't know what…what you mean," Behnaz said, startled. She hurriedly took two steps back.

As if abruptly reminded that her skin carried Vazura's distinctively scented cologne.

"Oh, I think you do." I'd played one of my nose's hunches, and I was right. In spades. "Tell me, 'Lady'. Is your husband aware that you're screwing his 'Good Captain'?"

Lady Behnaz let out a shriek of fury. She jabbed an elegantly manicured finger at me. "I hope the next time, the dragons crack your bones and devour you down to the marrow!"

She stamped out, her heels clicking like angry beetles on the stone floor.

"Anything else to add to that little spat, Vazura?" Kajari said wryly. The Captain remained silent, so Kajari added, "Let this be my first of two warnings to you. Do you wish to remain alive and in your Lord's service? Then keep your sword in its sheath."

"I'll take that under advisement, Lord Regent," Vazura said, with the slightest roll of his eyes. "What's your second warning?"

Kajari leaned towards the Captain. This time he spoke slowly. With a palpable, dark air of menace.

"If harm comes to anyone investigating Benedict's murder, you

and I shall have words. In private. And you will regret what I have to say."

And with that, he stepped back and gave a curt order to the pair of guards.

"Release him," Kajari commanded. "Escort him back to his command."

Vazura's chains fell away with a dull *clank*.

I think my jaw hit the floor about a nanosecond after the damned chains.

The Captain rubbed his wrists as the guards removed his ankle cuffs. He smiled wickedly at me, a cat that just got away with a tanker truck filled with heavy cream. He bowed to the Lord Regent, and then calmly strode from the room.

The guards followed at his heels. One stopped to close the wide double doors into Kajari's chambers. The muffled boom echoed in my ears. The Duke nodded wearily at my wide-eyed, outraged expression, and then turned back to the open window beyond his desk.

"But…why?" I whispered.

"Forgive me," he said, looking out over the courtyard. The sun had gone behind a mass of heavy clouds, turning everything a murky gray. "I didn't think that you would understand."

"Understand?" I shook my head, forced myself to avoid shouting in frustration. "What is there to understand? That you're actually going to buy that excuse of Vazura's? 'Oops, we let a weapon of mass destruction loose. Sorry for the inconvenience.' And don't even get me started on that paper-thin alibi from Lady Behnaz."

"And yet, I have no choice." Kajari faced me squarely. "That's the part you don't understand. I have no choice."

"You're the Lord Regent, the most powerful man in Andeluvia! And you say you have no choice? Do you realize that we just let the best suspect for Benedict's murder walk out your door?"

"Actually, I do. But it doesn't matter."

"Oh, it doesn't matter now. Fine! Why not?"

"Because all we have are suspicions," Kajari said patiently. "You haven't done what we brought you into our world to do. You haven't

proved—to me, or anyone else—that you've found Benedict's murderer."

"I'm still on the killer's track, Duke Kajari! Why else would Vazura want me dead?"

"Why else would he want you dead?" Kajari raised an eyebrow as he continued, adding an air of delicacy to his words. "You may accuse me of underestimating your character a second time. Based on the fact that you are quite the fair member of the fair sex."

"What does that…" I shook my head, kept my fingers tightly clenched.

"You're dealing with a man's ego," the Duke pointed out. "You turned down Vazura's advances quite forcefully. You inflicted harm on his person. And you stole his prized mount, right out from under him. All done, I must add, in front of his men."

"Fine. I wounded his pride. So why did you need to let Vazura go?"

"It's very simple," Kajari said.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Duke Kajari gave me an unsettled, troubled look. The look of a man whose energy and patience had been strained for the past few days. The folds of his mantle swayed as he walked over towards me. One strong hand grasped at the air as he hunted for the right words to say.

"When I was young," he mused, "I thought that being in charge meant that you could be freer than other people. Because no one could tell you what to do. It took me a while to learn how ignorant I was."

I nodded. This was a side of the Lord Regent I hadn't seen before. Perhaps one that nobody had.

"A ruler—even a temporary one—has duties. Sometimes, one must do things that seem foul in order to complete them. As we say in Andeluvia, you cannot scramble eggs without shattering some shells."

"I've heard something like that in my world," I replied. "It's usually said by those who believe the end justifies the means—any means."

"Perhaps that is true, then. But I have no 'choice' in my duty to protect Andeluvia. Unless you find King Benedict's murderer, our land goes to war with the centaurs in two days."

"Yes, but–"

He held up a hand until I quieted.

"I'll admit, Captain Vazura has his faults. Large ones."

Oh, yeah. And they're Grand Canyon sized, at that.

"But," Kajari continued, "he's still the best Air Cavalry commander this kingdom has. I can't pull him from service."

Emotion bubbled up my throat like a draught of fizzy champagne. Made me swallow before I spoke again.

"So you need him."

"The kingdom needs him," Kajari said, his voice surprisingly soft in my ear. "As the Lord Regent, I need everyone. Every able-bodied

person. To fight the war that draws close upon us now. Like a wolf breathing down the neck of its prey."

I shuddered at that. I groped for the wide, wooden sill at the base of the window. Turned and sat my butt down.

Dammit, not now! Not in front of Duke Kajari!

I felt a trembling, an uncontrollable trembling, race up my arms. I clenched my fingers so they wouldn't shake.

Kajari's warm hand clasped mine. I felt the rough ridges of his palm, the calloused inner side of his fingers against my skin. With his other hand, he gently raised my chin.

"I know you are strong," Kajari said, in that same rich, deep voice. I had no choice but to look at him. His eyes were the rich, roiling blue-gray of a storm-tossed sea. "Even so, I am truly sorry that you have been caught up in these events."

I didn't trust myself to speak. I'd felt everything building up inside. Everything had felt on a knife-edge since I'd come to Andeluvia. I felt like Death had given me a half-dozen passes, and I was burning through those passes like there was no tomorrow.

I'd been short of sleep, short of food, short of everything. Someone had tried their effing best to kill me. I'd fingered them, called them out in public. And then that bastard was just—let go?

I closed my eyes. Felt tears run down my cheeks. Warm, wet. Salty and tinged with ash from the Fayleene Woods.

And the Duke? The folds of his mantle rustled slightly as he shifted weight. His masculine scent filled my awareness, along with sharp spice notes, like cloves and cinnamon.

He folded me in his arms. Slowly, gently.

I hadn't had a man hold me like that in a long while.

Damn if it didn't feel *good*.

"Lady Chrissie," Kajari went on, "I know that the things I have done…have only made your life more difficult. You must understand. This is not what I wished to do. Only what I must."

"I understand," I said, and I pulled back from him. "It's just that… I'm trying to do what's right. To bring a criminal to justice. And almost no one wants me to actually do the job. I'm not used to that."

Kajari nodded. “I know how that feels, Lady Chrissie.”

“As I said before, I’m no ‘Lady’.” I took a half-step back, and this time I took his hands in mine. “But I’d like it very much if…well, could you call me Dayna? At least in private?”

He smiled, though his noble face remained sad. “I shall, Dayna. And you can call me ‘Evan’. When we are out of earshot of the court.”

“Evan,” I said, contemplating its sound. I liked it. “How is it that you know…what it feels like?”

He shook his head ruefully.

“Politics, Dayna. Even when you try to do the right thing for everyone, they can turn on you. That experience pains me more than you could ever know. It pierces the heart like arrows in the breast.”

“What do you know,” I said, trying to laugh. “We do have something in common, after all.”

“That we do, Dayna.” Kajari handed me a small cloth from a drawer. I dried my eyes as I finally composed myself. It took a while. Kajari took the time to straighten out his attire as well.

“Evan, I understand what you had to do,” I finally said. “But if Vazura murdered Benedict, then I’ve just lost my best shot at putting him away for good. And if Vazura wasn’t the one who murdered Benedict…”

My voice trailed off as my brain finally clicked the next piece into place. And the piece beyond that. Kajari frowned, puzzled, as I remained silent a moment longer.

I realized then what I’d been doing wrong. And what I had to do next. It wasn’t what I wanted, but as the Duke had said, you did what you had to if you wanted scrambled eggs.

And I was about to shatter some eggshells.

“Lord Regent, can you summon everyone to the meeting hall? Immediately?”

Duke Kajari straightened up as I used his formal title. He raised an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean by, ‘everyone’?”

“I mean every single damned one of the nobles in this palace. Even Vazura, if you can recall him before he’s left the palace.”

“And those assigned to you? The griffin, the fayleene, and the

centaur?"

"Especially the centaur."

"That is easily done." Kajari pulled a small silver medallion from one of his pockets. He rubbed it with his thumb, and I heard a bell-like chime. "Another of Galen's inventions, similar to the one that brought you here. A signal to all those who wear one to come to the hall."

"Then we should go, too."

"You must go," Kajari said, and he made an apologetic shrug. "Yet another duty of my station. It is best if I come a few minutes afterwards. That way, no one looks like they're disrespecting my station by arriving late."

I nodded. Once I was out of Kajari's chambers, I all but sprinted down the corridors, navigating more by luck than sense of direction. I found myself back at the long, deep room of the meeting hall.

I finally got one piece of good luck. Galen and Shaw had arrived at the hall first. I hurried over and Shaw stepped forward, his stern-looking face even more grave than usual.

"The Wizard told me of thy trial by fire," the griffin hissed, as quietly as his voice would allow. "On the eve past, many in the court spoke ill of your mission."

Galen nodded. "Truly, I doubt many would have wept if we'd fallen."

With the delicate tic of his hooves on stone, Prince Liam entered, flanked by a pair of awed-looking courtiers. I nodded meaningfully in his direction. He spoke a word to the humans and left them behind to join us.

Shaw looked at the new arrival with a curious stare.

"Mine eyes have never seen the like! A fayleene, here?"

"Shaw, this is Prince Liam," I said, introducing the two with a gesture, "Liam, this is Shaw, the noble griffin I spoke of."

The two creatures bowed to each other.

"Dayna," Liam said worriedly, "The word 'round this court is grim. Much treachery lurks in the shadows."

"I know. That's why we need to act, and act fast."

“I’m all for that,” he agreed, with a dip of his antler, “but in which direction do we dash?”

“Up and out,” I replied, and then I addressed Galen. “When would you be able to transport us? To my world, I mean?”

“Verily, I have already prepared the spell to send you back. I have modified it to return you to your home dwelling.” Galen did a double-take. “Bide one moment, Dayna. Did you say, ‘us’?”

“That’s right.” I smiled at him.

Galen rummaged in his pockets. “Yes…I have the components on hand. We can leave when you wish.”

“Then follow my lead. Get ready to cast the spell.”

“Another world,” Liam breathed. “Truly, this will be an adventure!”

“Where thou must go, I shall follow,” Shaw intoned, with a majestic flex of his wings.

“Dayna,” Galen said, “are you sure that this move is a wise one?”

“No,” I replied. “But it’s the best one we’ve got left.”

Galen looked doubtful. However, if he had any more concerns, he kept them to himself as the room filled with the assorted nobles from all over the palace. Captain Vazura and Lady Behnaz came in and sat together at one end of the table, a concentrated glower of dislike on their faces.

That was fine by me. If Vazura wasn’t the murderer…then I hadn’t gotten anywhere by staying in Andeluvia. It was time to change my strategy. I’d been playing the game on the enemy’s home turf. It was time to bring it back to mine.

Kajari finally made his appearance. The assembled lords and ladies bowed slightly to him as he passed. Instead of sitting at the head of the table, he addressed my group with a genuine curiosity.

“As you requested, Lady Chrissie, I have assembled the court of Andeluvia on short notice.” He tapped a foot in a show of impatience. “What is it that you deem important enough to interfere with our business?”

A murmur of agreement ran through the crowd.

“Only to announce our good news,” I said confidently. I beamed

my best grin, and then added, “The Wizard has prepared a spell to take us back to my world. I have a device there which will tell me who Benedict’s murderer is.”

The murmurs redoubled. Vazura and Lady Behnaz whispered urgently to each other. Kajari glanced at them, and then frowned.

“You are sure of this?”

“Without a doubt. And what’s more–” the room went quiet as I paused for emphasis, “the murderer knows this, too. It’s why they tried to kill me last night. He or she knows that I’m breathing down their neck.”

I took a step back towards Galen. I nodded at him.

“Until next time, Lord Regent,” I said.

Galen’s voice boomed out an incantation. A soundless flash, and the ranks of people before us vanished in a blaze of white.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Galen's spell to send us to my world dumped my brain back into an ocean of eye-searing whiteness. The burnt-oven smell of ozone filled my nostrils. I tried to scream. Air rushed out from between my lips in a dull hiss.

I landed with a bump that sent a painful twinge through my knees. Teetered on the sandy brown edge of my well-worn living room carpet. I stumbled forward a step.

My senses threatened to overwhelm me. The solid walls of my home, the scents of coffee and newsprint and lemon wood polish made me weak in the knees. Then Galen's firm, warm hand clasped my shoulder and steadied me.

"Allow me, Dayna," the centaur said, as I regained my footing. "Crossing worlds is rarely a comfortable kind of travel."

"No kidding," I said, in a quavering voice.

Liam sprawled on the carpet next to me. After a moment, he raised his head, shook it groggily, and got to his feet. He pawed at the carpet's surface with one cloven forehoof.

"Strange ground cover you have in this world," he said, half to himself.

Shaw managed to keep his footing, but the griffin swayed and listed like a drunken lion. He spread his wings reflexively to balance himself and knocked over the books and knickknacks that I had perched on the fireplace mantle.

"My apologies, Dayna," Shaw said ruefully. "Thy chambers are a snug nest for one such as I."

"Admittedly, you do keep rather cozy quarters," Galen agreed.

My living room had a vaulted ceiling, but the centaur had to duck his head under one of the mission-style beams. He'd have to do some serious knee bends if he was going to get through some of the other doors in the house.

"The architect wasn't familiar with centaurs or griffins." I stepped

over to the windows looking out over my front yard. Gauzy white curtains lay over the glass, but I hastily drew the heavy drapes closed. “Neither are my neighbors. I’ll have to come up with a way to get you three out of the house without attracting attention. Probably after dark.”

Galen snorted. “With less than two days left before my people go to war? I hope that we shall not throw away the pittance of time we have!”

“The Wizard doth speak true,” Shaw chimed in. “Together we can out-run, out-fly, out-fox, or out-fight anything in thy world.”

I held my hands up. “Guys, hold on. Listen to me. This place is different than Andeluvia. A lot different.”

“In what way?” Liam asked, canting an antler at me.

“Well…” My mind raced for a second, trying to pick the best way to explain. “For starters, the ground cover you mentioned, my carpet. A lot of my world is covered in things that would be odd to you. We, ah, crush rocks into a kind of paste and smooth it out flat, flatter than the cobblestones in Andeluvia, and use it all over the place, for sidewalks and streets.”

“Why in the world would you do such a thing?”

“Because most people in my world get around using cars. Automobiles. They’re vehicles that can go fast on that kind of surface. You could think of cars as a ‘horseless’ carriage.”

The three fantasy creatures crowded into my living room were silent for a moment. They traded glances with each other. Finally, Galen spoke up.

“Praytell, what is a ‘carriage’?”

I took a breath and closed my eyes. Shouldn’t have been surprised, really. During the brief time that I’d been in the city outside the palace, I hadn’t seen a single carriage. People had either walked, ridden on horses, or used…

“Wagons,” I said. “Think of a wagon, only an enclosed one, and pulled not by a horse or oxen, but driven by a machine.”

Galen nodded. The others looked skeptical. And just in time to punctuate that awkward moment, my stomach made a growling noise

that would have done justice to a wildcat.

"Much as I dislike wasting time," Galen said, "we've all been on the run since yesterday, you most of all. Perhaps a visit to your pantry might be in order?"

"That's not a bad idea." After all, between my summoning, the travel to the Grove of the Willows, and another trip to the Fayleene Woods, I'd had at best a handful of berries, a flask of water, and a bit of tart.

Broiled mouse tart, that is. Can't forget the mouse. My stomach rumbled as it demanded to be fed something it would recognize.

"In the meantime," Galen continued, "I have an idea that I wish to try on my own. Mayhap I can solve part of the problem of going unnoticed in your world."

"Shaw, Liam, let's go find something to eat, give Galen some room," I said, and I led the way.

My kitchen worked fine, but that's all I can brag about. The dark, age-spotted wooden cabinets and a stove that had seen better days during the Reagan administration would've made your average gourmet chef turn up their delicate nose.

A single square window set in the opposite wall let in the late morning sunshine. I pulled the curtains closed as Liam came into the room. His little hooves made muffled clops on the floor's faded olive-green linoleum.

Shaw just managed to squeeze through the doorway with a grunt. With a sinuous, leonine grace, he made his way around to peer over my shoulder as I pulled a package of taquitos from the freezer and popped the tray into the microwave. With that appliance humming away, I opened the fridge next.

I found some leftovers that hadn't sprouted anything interesting yet—a platter of roasted chicken and a bowl of Greek salad—and set them out on the floor. Liam sniffed at the salad for a second before diving in with gusto. In contrast, I think Shaw would've taken my hand off at the wrist if I'd been any slower.

I heard a fizzy *pop*, like a magnum-sized champagne cork going off in the other room. This didn't faze my two companions. Liam made

happy-deer sounds as he dove into the salad bowl. Shaw was busy cracking the chicken bones in his beak. I squeezed between the two and stepped back out into the living room.

"I did it!" Galen said, with a jubilant expression. "Transformation's an Archmage-class spell. I completed it properly on the first try!" He grinned from ear-to-ear as he stuffed a bottle of some smoky substance back into one of his jacket pockets. My jaw dropped.

From the waist down, he was completely naked.

Of course, that state of undress was normal for Galen. At least as a centaur. But now, it felt as if I'd just wandered into the men's locker room while one of the linebackers was suiting up.

"Galen, that's…you look…good!" I stammered out. My gaze flicked down low again. Very low. Yes, Galen still looked like a stallion in one respect, that much was sure. "Wait right there. Don't move."

I tugged open the hall closet. I rummaged around, found a bag full of pre-breakup clothes that my last boyfriend had neglected to take back. Luckily, he'd left a couple boxer shorts, some gym socks, and a pair of tennis shoes. I also found a pair of jeans that looked like they'd been washed by beating them between a pair of bricks, but they'd do.

"Here you go," I said, hoping my blush didn't show as I handed Galen the small pile. "If you're going to pass as human, you need a few more threads."

"Of course, how silly of me." He quickly slipped on the underwear, pants, and footwear. Miraculously, the shoes fit. The jeans looked tight, and hung about two inches short above his ankles. "How do I look?"

"Passable." Between the Byronic jacket, the sneakers, and the beat-up pair of jeans, it was *Heathcliff* visits *The Gap*. But let's be honest. With his build and looks, Galen could pull off just about anything short of a poncho made of trash bags.

A *crash* came from the kitchen. The sound of raised voices. Galen and I traded a glance and went back through the door.

The griffin and fayleene had finished off the contents of bowl and platter. For an encore, they'd knocked over my kitchen garbage can

and were fighting over the scraps. Shaw let out a feline snarl as Liam stood his ground over a small pile of wilted lettuce I'd tossed out a day or so earlier.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

Liam looked at me, abashed. "We finished your rations and were still hungry. Shaw smelled more food in the tall, skinny bin and turned it over–"

"The fayleene is mistaken," Shaw interjected. "My beak got stuck. I turned the contents of thy bin out by chance."

I sighed. "Look, I'll get some more food for everyone, okay? Just give me a minute. Liam, I'm guessing that you only eat plants."

"The only proper food there is," Liam asserted.

I ignored that.

"Right. Shaw, what do you eat?"

"My kind doth consume anything," the griffin said proudly. He eyed the fayleene as he added, "though in truth, we like meat. Ideally, in portions about the size of…a well-fleshed fawn."

"Oh, my," said Galen.

"Shaw," I said firmly, "we do *not* eat our teammates. Talk, yes. Eat, no."

"Fair enough," Shaw agreed. His pink tongue flicked over the edge of his beak as he addressed Liam. "fayleene princeling, how doth it feel to look so delicious?"

Liam glanced at me, eyes wide.

"Shaw, I mean it!" I warned.

The griffin made a resonant chortle. "'Twas spoken in jest, Dayna. Never would I harm a companion, e'en should they look so tender and edible."

I grumbled under my breath about griffins having a strange sense of humor and went to the garage. The smell of parched dust greeted me as I opened the door and groped for the light's pull cord.

The fluorescent bulb flickered to life. Like most non-native Californians, I'd never adapted to living in a house without a basement. So I'd simply turned the attached two-car garage into a double-sized storage space. Stacks of cardboard boxes lined the far

wall at the edge of the light.

The dust-flecked hood of a large SUV glinted back at me in the bulb's cool luminescence. I'd been storing a friend's Ford Expedition during their summer abroad, and it looked like it was going to come in handy.

Something else along the wall gleamed pearl white. A gray, padded handle jutted out to one side. Here was something I could put to good use right away.

I reached for the handle and gave it a strong tug.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Here's a tip for anyone planning to host a lunch party with a pair of heraldic beasts and a talking deer: buy snack food in the jumbo packs. I emptied fridge and pantry of everything from tubs of baby spinach to my old cans of Corn Niblets, which Liam gobbled up like candy.

It turned out that Galen had a sweet tooth of his own. After sharing out the taquitos and a microwave pizza with me, he cleaned out my last quart of Chunky Chocolate Coma in a dozen swipes of one of my soup spoons.

None of that compared to Shaw's appetite. Neither frozen chunks of cauliflower nor uncooked scoops of corned beef hash fazed him. The griffin snagged one of Galen's slices of pizza. He followed that up by eating the cardboard box the pizza had come in, and pronounced both as 'delicious'.

That's where the pearl-white object with the gray handle I had tucked in the garage proved handy. My trusty old chest freezer. I suppressed a shudder as I opened it. Remembered what my Dad had used our old Kelvinator for. But all I had in mine were frozen veggies and a huge pair of bone-in hams I'd won in a raffle last year. I hoisted them out, nudged the freezer closed with a bump of my hip, and shoved my way back inside with a ten-pound hock in each hand.

Even a griffin couldn't eat rock-hard pork, so I tossed the hams into the sink to thaw. After that little chore, I proceeded to nuke all the microwave popcorn I had in the house. I stacked a miniature mountain of popcorn in a deep punch bowl and set it down by the television set. For the next hour and a half, I yakked non-stop as a commentator over my cable channels. I started out with news, and then channel-surfed as best I could to get them situated.

It turned out that my idea had been a pretty good one. All my guests, Galen in particular, understood the principle behind the TV. To their credit, while they had plenty of questions, very little of what

they saw on the screen truly baffled them.

"Does it not seem odd to you," Galen said to me, "that you have so many things in this world, non-living things, that move you around and do your work?"

"Not as odd as this world's absence of fayleene," Liam put in. He lifted his muzzle out of the popcorn bowl and ran his tongue over his nose to remove stray grains of salt. "Who manages and protects your forests?"

"Mind not thy forests," Shaw replied. He sprawled out like a golden shag rug on my sofa. "What of the skies? E'en there, strange machines."

"Strange or no, we've got to keep going." Galen crossed his arms as he addressed me. "Dayna, where is this device you spoke of, the one that will tell us the identity of Benedict's murderer?"

I paused for a moment before I spoke. "Um, yeah. I have a confession to make about that."

Liam sighed. "Words like that always bode ill."

"I do have a device that I want to use," I explained, and I dug the bullets we'd retrieved from the Grove of the Willows out of my pocket, "It's downtown, at the building where I work. If we're lucky, it should tell me a lot about the gun that fired these. But no, it won't tell us the identity of the murderer right away."

Galen scowled. "Then by the blazing sun, why expend my power to bring us here in the first place?"

"Because we're not here to solve Benedict's murder!" That brought the Wizard up short. "I know two things for sure. First, whoever murdered Benedict, they're from your world, not mine. Second, they're either on the Andeluvian court, or they're using it to watch us."

A pause, as the three exchanged glances. I didn't move a muscle, didn't back down. I waited until one of them could formulate a question. Shaw spoke up first.

"Thy statements are bold," he said, with a ruffle of his feathers. "Thou hast a griffin's heroic heart, but I hope thy reason is at work too."

"It is," I insisted. "Let's take this in turn."

They watched me as I began to pace. Couldn't help myself. Motion of any sort seemed to help me. Like my thoughts needed a little push to come out right.

"How do I know the murderer is from your world? Because of how damned clumsy the murder attempts have been."

"Evidently not clumsy enough to fail," Galen muttered.

"Yes and no. That's what puzzled me back at the Grove of Willows. A rifle's designed to be used at a distance. If the shooter needed to stay within eye and earshot, then they should've brought along a regular handgun. The most slack-jawed hit man in Los Angeles would've known that."

"You said murder 'attempts', Dayna," Liam pointed out. "Was there another that I was not aware of?"

"Yes, but not on Benedict. The day before I came to Andeluvia, someone shot at me. Probably with the same rifle as the one used to kill Benedict. But they weren't able to hit me, and I gave them *two* chances when I froze up. That tells me the shooter hasn't been able to practice, or they don't know how to use a rifle scope."

"None of us know what a 'rifle scope' is," Galen agreed. "So it stands to reason that a fellow denizen of our world probably wouldn't, either."

"And that brings me to my other point." I stopped pacing for a moment and regarded the Wizard. "You and I rode at a near gallop all the way to the Fayleene Woods. And yet, a pair of dragons managed to arrive at the same time we did. I doubt that, even flying at full speed, a dragon's that much faster than a horse."

"That is correct."

"Someone had to act fast to set those dragons on us. Someone who knew exactly where to send them, very soon after Albess Thea told us that we needed to speak with the fayleene."

"'Tis true," Shaw said. "I heard Master Seer Zenos tell the court you were leaving, nigh upon five minutes after we parted ways."

"And Zenos harbors no love for us," Galen acknowledged. "But Dayna, if we're not here to find the Good King's murderer, why did

you claim we would do just that, right before we left the court?"

"Because I was *bluffing*," I said. "And because I was setting a lure. I wanted Benedict's killer to hear. If he or she thinks I can unveil their identity, they'll be desperate to stop us."

Galen looked at me askance. "You are using us as…bait?"

"Bait tends to get chewed up, Galen. No, if we know that the killer is going to have to come after us, we have a chance to turn the tables."

The centaur blinked. "How would shifting furniture around help?"

I shook my head, irritated with myself. "I mean, we're on my ground now, where I'm familiar with things. If Benedict's killer has to stick their neck out to stop us–"

"Then we but need to strike!" Shaw unsheathed his foreclaws and raked the arm of my poor, abused sofa for emphasis.

"Even so, Shaw. Now, I need suggestions. Surprise should be on our side. How can we move fast enough to capture Benedict's killer? Or take them out of the picture, if it comes down to it?"

My three companions were silent for a moment. Galen rubbed his chin in thought while Shaw let out a rumbling, contemplative purr. Liam tapped his forehoof on the carpet and cleared his throat to speak.

"Dayna, only a very few know that we fayleene can detect strong magic," he said. "Could that be of use to us here?"

I looked to Galen for an answer.

"I can attest to the fact that crossing between worlds requires a tremendous amount of magical energy," he said, with a touch of weariness. "As it is, I don't have enough remaining to bring us back home for at least a few hours."

"It's hard for me to pinpoint anything all on my own," Liam warned. "We fayleene do this in pairs or groups when we need to find something specific, like a spring of magically charged water."

Pairs or groups? Well, there was an obvious answer to that.

"Galen," I said, "I want you to accompany me to my office. But could you create an enchantment that mimics what Liam can do? If we gave it to Shaw–"

The Wizard smiled. “I understand. Together, they would be able to triangulate a position.”

Galen surprised me by pulling out a golden medallion. Specifically, the one he’d used to bring me to Andeluvia. He’d punched a small hole in the medallion and strung it on a leather cord. With a series of incantations and a dusting of some cumin-scented powder, Galen draped the medallion over the griffin’s neck.

“That shall do it,” Galen pronounced. “Shaw, your medallion will glow when it detects strong magic. Tap it with a talon when you’re ready to contact us, and we’ll be able to hear your voice.”

“There is one more thing,” Liam said. “fayleene magic of this sort works best if I’m higher up. Are there any nearby hills or bluffs?”

I carefully drew back one of the window shades. Liam peered out for a moment. The slope to the side and back of my house curved up into Griffith Park, right below the observatory.

“I don’t think it’ll be a problem,” I said. “Just stay off the roads and biking paths, if you can.”

“Nay, not a problem for him,” Shaw put in. “What is thy proposal for hiding me?”

“That presents a substantial challenge,” Galen said ruefully. “I cannot transform either the griffin or fayleene into humanoid form.”

“Thank goodness for small favors,” Liam said under his breath, with a shudder of revulsion.

“Shaw, we’re going to hide you,” I said. “What’s more, we’re going to hide you in plain sight of every person in Los Angeles.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Cardboard tube in hand, I pushed my way through the exit of the copy shop down on Los Feliz Boulevard. I walked the entire length of the parking lot, half-sure that the blazing afternoon sun had turned the asphalt tacky in the heat. As I approached the tuxedo-black SUV, I casually surveyed the nearly empty lot.

No one there to see. Good.

I tugged open the driver's side door and slipped inside. The smell of warm fur and feathers greeted me. I'd left the engine running and the air conditioning on at full blast, which helped keep my companions comfortable. Halfway comfortable, anyway.

Galen, still in human form, fared the best. At least the passenger seat had been designed for his current shape. For Liam and Shaw, I'd folded down the back seats to get the maximum space available. The fayleene prince managed to stake out a halfway comfortable spot behind Galen, though he had to lie down and watch that his unbroken antler didn't stab anyone if he moved his head.

Shaw, to his credit, didn't complain as he contorted himself to fit inside the SUV. But even lying down, his wings blocked my rearview mirror and his paws twitched, like those of a dog confirmed to a too-small kennel.

"Was this really necessary?" Galen asked, as he took the cardboard container from me. "I fail to see how this will turn the griffin's form invisible."

"It's not the package," I said, as I put the SUV in gear. "It's what I have inside of it."

I'd explained the plan to everyone back at my place. I'm not sure that they really understood it, but they were willing to follow me for the time being. I'd gone to my study and tapped out an online order to the copy store.

And although Galen fumed at the delay, I refused to leave the house until I'd rinsed off and changed my clothes. Look, I'd been

rolled in dirt and put through an effing forest fire. Just because the three males in my company didn't object to my smelling like a cross between a camel and a chimney flue, didn't mean that *I* had to put up with it.

After a thorough wipe-down with a facecloth, I rubbed on some sunscreen, stuck some items from the medicine cabinet in my pocket, and tossed my dirt-encrusted Anne Taylor outfit in the tub. I'd figure out a way to wash it later. I slipped on new underwear, a pair of jeans, a matching top, and some sensible running shoes. And to make sure the next part of my plan came off, I took along two spare medical scrubs I kept in my bedroom closet.

I took care to stay at or under the speed limit as I took us north, up the steep slopes of the roads into Griffith Park. I couldn't imagine what I would say if a cop pulled me over. The SUV's tinted windows were tinted dark enough to hide my friends from casual viewers, but I didn't think for a moment that it would fool a close-up inspection.

It didn't help that my passengers were alternately curious and frightened by the traffic around them. Between the questions and comments from my three companions, I almost missed the turn-off I'd been looking for.

I pulled off the paved street and onto one of the gravel-lined access roads used mostly by the park rangers. On a day like today, when the sun beat down like a sledgehammer, the odds of us running into an errant trail hiker was practically nil. I brought us to a halt along the back side of a thickly wooded ridge.

I opened the rear hatch. Both griffin and fayleene leapt out with a sigh of relief, their hooves and paws crunching on the road gravel. They stopped in their tracks, and simply stared at the view. Below us, the metropolis of Los Angeles stretched off to the horizon in a pall of gray steel, silver glass, and concrete brown.

"How far does it go?" Liam asked. I heard an odd catch in his voice.

"A long ways," I said.

"That's more…humans…than I ever dreamt of," the fayleene prince said quietly.

“You’re not alone in thinking that,” Galen said, as he watched me uncap the cardboard tube and set a coiled-up cylinder of vinyl on the ground.

I unrolled the cylinder to reveal a brightly colored banner, complete with metal grommets and a pair of fastening straps at one end. I wove the straps securely to the leather cord that Shaw already wore about his feathered neck, creating a light makeshift harness. While I did this, each of my team craned their necks, trying to see what I’d had printed out.

“I don’t get it,” Liam said.

“Neither do I,” Galen said. “What is a ‘the-ater’?”

I grinned. I’d paid top dollar for a version of the banners that you could tow behind a small airplane. I figured that pretty well described what Shaw was, in practice. And in this town, that was all the inspiration I needed.

Bright red letters spelled out: *GRIFFINS GALORE III: COMING SOON TO A THEATRE NEAR YOU!!!*

“It’s like…an announcement,” I explained. “It tells people to go to a building we call a ‘theatre’. To see a…well, a kind of show we call a ‘movie’. About griffins.”

Shaw blinked and then fixed me in his bright, golden stare. “Thou hast turned me into…an advertisement?”

“Sort of, yes.”

“Will this not make yet *more* people look upon me?”

“I’m counting on it. Trust me on this one. In this town, you’ll attract so much attention that you’ll be completely invisible.”

“Dayna, I have seen thy cunning mind at work,” he said, and his deep voice rumbled in my ear. “I shall have faith in thy methods.”

“Thank you, Shaw.” I reached out and rubbed the back of his neck. The griffin purred a little as I continued. “Okay, you and Liam are on patrol until sunset. Stay sharp, avoid people if you can.”

“And no talking with anyone,” Liam finished, with a roll of his eyes.

“That’s right,” I said, trying to stay serious. “Liam, are you sure you can find your way back to my house?”

He made an injured-sounding sniff. “Next you’ll be asking whether I can cross a field without crunching through the tall grass.”

And with that, he made a silent bound off the road. Liam ducked into the underbrush, moving like a fish through clear water. In a twinkling, his fawnlike spots and tan coat vanished.

Shaw made a clacking sound with his beak and leapt into the air with a mighty beat of his wings. Pebbles pelted my shins as the downdraft kicked up loose bits of gravel. The long vinyl sheet made a slithery sound as Shaw bore it aloft. In no time, the griffin leveled out at speed, heading for the heart of the city.

“Let’s go do our part,” I said to Galen, once Shaw had dwindled to a thimble-sized golden speck.

“Agreed,” the Wizard said heavily. “I just hope your plan will work. This place where you live…they hide it well, but it’s bewildering to each of us.”

“It’ll work.”

“How do you figure that? We can’t–”

“Galen,” I said, placing my hand on his arm. “Trust me, it’ll work.” I slammed the Expedition’s rear hatch shut to punctuate my statement. “Come on, Mister Wizard. Let’s see if science can answer some of our questions.”

Galen got in and we buckled up. He looked at my security badge where it hung from one of the sun visors.

“You mentioned that one needs a badge to enter your building,” Galen said. “I don’t think my magic will work to fool your machines.”

“I’m not sure either,” I agreed, as I stepped on the gas and pulled onto the main road. “But there’s another way to get into the building. No one thinks to use it.”

“Because it is too well hidden?”

“Actually, it’s because it’s too gross.”

“I cannot help but worry when you say these things, Dayna.”

“Smart man. We’re going in through where they dispose of the medical waste. It’s why I’ve got a pair of scrubs stashed in the center console. And I even brought along something that I normally avoid. Something to help get you past the smell.”

I flipped open the center console and handed Galen the little glass jar I'd pulled from my medicine cabinet.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

There's a reason you don't enter a morgue through the back door.

Around the rear of the Office of the Medical Examiner is a loading dock where special dumpsters are placed to receive and ship out medical waste. Everything from fluid leavings to broken tools and soiled fabrics go out this way. (And no, we don't throw out the unclaimed bodies.)

Galen certainly looked human enough. But the security desk wouldn't let anyone in without a look at a driver's license, even if they accompanied me. That's where my trump card came in. I knew that the door lock by the loading area had been busted for months. A repair was low on the list of things that needed fixing. After all, what kind of thief would be desperate enough to steal containers of embalming liquid? Even *I* had problems with the stench.

Which is why, as much as I hated Vick's VapoRub, I'd handed a glass jar of the stuff to Galen and instructed him to slather a greasy band of it under his nostrils. To his credit, he bore the sweet-rotten pork smell that pervaded the dock with only a few choice curses under his breath. Not until I'd led him through and closed the broken door behind us did he stagger against the wall.

"Dayna," he gasped, "are we through the worst of it?"

"Yes, we are," I said, and it was my turn to steady him.

"Superb. Now I need someplace to vomit."

I grabbed Galen by the elbow. I half-shoved him down the hall and through the doors of the men's restroom. I waited patiently outside until the sounds of retching and running water had died away. The Wizard came back out, looking abashed as he dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a crumpled paper towel.

"My apologies."

"Think nothing of it, Galen. Happens to all of us." I took the towel from him and dabbed some drops of water from his upper lip. An unexpected bonus for me was that he'd washed off the Vick's. My

sense of smell was already starting to claw its way back from the edge of the menthol-scented abyss.

Together, we went down the slate-colored corridors. Galen's eyes darted curiously to the office windows whenever we passed a lab or chemical storage room. We passed one or two people on the way. Clad in our pale green scrubs, no one gave us so much as a second glance.

"I cannot help but notice how quiet it is in here," Galen said, inclining his head towards me to keep his voice low.

"Saturday afternoons are always slow," I replied. "Ask the cops, no one in L.A. gets around to shooting each other until the third shift."

I quickened my pace in anticipation as we walked through an entryway labeled *Ballistics Examination*. The 'gun lab', as I thought of it, reminded me of a cross between a badly run machine shop and a sleazy cafeteria. Lime green tiles provided a surreal backdrop to the large glass examination cases and stacks of clear Lucite sample trays.

Galen took a seat next to me as I turned on the ancient desktop computer next to one of the cases. While the screen hummed to life, I shook out the bullets we'd collected from the Grove of the Willows and put one in each of the sample trays. Then I slipped the entire thing into the case.

"Shield your eyes for a second," I warned.

Galen held up a hand as I flipped the switch on the high-intensity lights inside the case. I went back to the computer and then logged into the video control program. Inside the case, a set of four mobile cameras *whirred* and *chuffed* into place like little robotic squirrels. The lenses alternately dilated and closed as I selected a scanning pattern from the program and let it run its course.

"Amazing! I have never seen the like, Dayna," Galen breathed.

"The cameras are taking pictures of every part on each bullet," I explained. Galen nodded, but he continued to raptly follow each camera as it crawled into position on its miniature robotic boom. "When they're done, the computer sort of 'stitches' the pictures together. Like if you were piecing together a map."

"And this 'map' tells you something about the bullet?"

"It should. See, when a bullet is fired through a rifled barrel, it's

etched with a pattern of fine grooves. The patterns can be very distinct from weapon to weapon. It's why we call it ballistic 'fingerprinting'."

A soft chime came from the computer as the cameras completed their run. My fingers flew over the keys, next pulling up the archived photos of the bullets that had been fired at me. Next, I split the screen so that I could see the grooves from that sample on the left.

I placed the scans of the bullets we'd retrieved from Andeluvia on the right. Together, the pictures rotated through 360 degrees of scans, as if they were satellite pictures taken of a swarm of particularly dirty, rust-colored asteroids.

Galen snorted. "It looks plain enough to me, unless my wits are addled."

"Your wits seem to be fine," I agreed. In each case, the scratches and dings looked the same. As if to underline the point, the program spit out the result at the bottom of the screen. *Ballistic Points Matchup: 99.77%.*

"So someone tried to kill me with the same rifle they used on Benedict," I said. "That clears up one thing, but muddies another."

"It does?"

"It tells me we're dealing with one person. One Andeluvian. At least, only one that's willing to pull the trigger."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Galen said, giving me a questioning glance. "Couldn't any of your fellow humans pick up a rifle and fire it?"

"Yes, that's true. But ask yourself this: how willing would you be to let someone use any of your personal magical tools?"

Galen pursed his lips in thought. "Not very, truth be told. Anyone who uses magic can be funny that way. For example, Master Seer Zenos uses his staff of stunning quite well. I've seen him knock people off horseback at fifty paces. He's gotten it balanced just to his personal taste."

"Some people can be that way about guns," I acknowledged. "But in my world, rifles are mass produced. You can even buy them in sporting goods stores. So, if you've got more than one person on your

team, why share a single firearm when you could buy more?"

"You make a good point."

"See, that's where things get muddy for me again, Galen. The events of Benedict's assassination still don't make sense to me. The body of the person you found next to Benedict. The guy you left in my world, to lure me to Andeluvia. Who is he? And you know what bothers me most of all…"

"Yes, Dayna?"

"It's the fact that it takes less than a second to pull a firearm's trigger," I slapped the desk next to the keyboard in frustration. "Why go out of your way to kill one person with a rifle, and then switch to magic to kill the other?"

Galen looked troubled. "These questions baffled me, too. It's why I spoke in favor of Albess Thea's plan to bring someone like you onto the case."

I powered down the computer and the examination case, and then retrieved the bullets from the sample trays. I tapped the desk with one knuckle and made my decision.

"Whenever you're in a corner…" I murmured, half to myself.

"Dayna?"

"It's one of the lessons I learned in school," I said. "We used to joke about it—when you're out of leads, you're stuck in the 'Coroner's Corner'."

"Ah," Galen replied.

"And the moral is: whenever you're in a corner, go back to the body."

"Back to the body?"

"That's right."

And with that, I led the way to the gowning room. I swapped out the scrubs we'd sneaked in with for new ones that could be used in the autopsy room, then showed Galen how to put on the protective mask.

"Are you absolutely sure you want me to wear this?" The Wizard's voice sounded small and muffled behind the mask. "I would be more than happy to wait elsewhere."

"No dice," I said firmly. "I need a fresh pair of eyes. Maybe you'll

see something that I missed."

"By chance, could I have more of that fragrant grease for my nose?"

"Galen!"

"Right, right, I didn't suspect I could."

Finally, with our latex gloves in place, we entered the chiller rooms, where we kept the bodies. I led Galen past the cheery yellow-brick tiles and over to the deep-chill compartments. Each compartment was a miniature, wall-mounted fridge where we could slide the bodies in or out for inspection.

I ran my hand down the clear plastic tags attached to the compartment handles. Medical examiners still called them 'toe tags' even though we didn't put the tags right on the body anymore. I found the tag labeled 'Connor MacLeod', and grasped the handle next to it.

With a rattle of stainless steel rollers, I slid out the inner compartment. Galen's breath whistled through his mask in amazement. All I could do was stare.

The steel examination table gleamed back at us.

Empty.

I clenched my eyes shut for a moment, as if trying to blot out the sight. I tugged down my face mask and choked out a breath. Galen did likewise.

"There's supposed to be a body here," I said. I slammed my fist on the table with a *clang*. "There's supposed to be an effing body here!"

"Dayna, be calm," Galen said. "Perhaps…you opened the wrong door?"

"Like hell I did!" I flared. "This guy didn't just walk out of here! And nobody's just going to move him without my signature–"

"Sure they can," drawled a voice.

Galen and I spun on our heels. My hand flew to my chest and I let out a gasp. A heavyset figure in a set of green scrubs and a pair of pince-nez glasses came into the light.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Christ, Shelly!" I said. I felt my heart pound underneath my top. "You scared me there for a moment."

"Don't you go takin' Our Lord's name in vain," Shelly Richardson said, though her tone sounded more pleased than scolding. She stepped forward and we clasped gloved hands. "As for scared? Dayna, you took a year's growth off me when you up and left."

I felt my face flush. I'd vanished in a burst of light, right in front of my friend. She'd probably thought I was dead—and did I even bother to call her when I got back, let her know I was all right?

And…hell, what was I going to tell her *now?*

"Ah, about my leaving…Shelly, I know this is going to be difficult to understand."

"Difficult? It's not difficult to understand, Dayna."

"It's not?"

"I knew that when you left, heaven needed you for something grand." Shelly pulled her facemask down and smiled beatifically at Galen. "And look…you brought back an angel!"

Now it was Galen's turn to blush. Ironically, that only made him look even cuter. And I didn't mean 'cute' in the style of the fayleene princeling, either.

"My pardon," Galen said, making a half-bow. "We have not yet been properly introduced."

"I know," I said, trying to keep control of the conversation. "Galen, this is my friend, Shelly Richardson. She's one of the senior medical examiners for the LAPD."

Galen stepped around the empty chill table, somehow managing to look tall and dashing, even while in a green scrub. He gently took her hand and smiled, all perfect white teeth and shaggy dark hair.

I wasn't sure, but I think Shelly let out a tiny squeal of delight.

"Charmed, Milady Richardson."

"Yeah, charmed," I said flatly. "Shelly, this is Galen. Galen…

Friesain. He's from that other place."

"Heaven," Shelly said, though I wasn't sure if she was describing that other place, or what she was feeling right then and there.

"I hate to break the mood here. But we're on the clock. Shelly, what did you say about the body being moved?"

Reluctantly, Shelly broke eye contact with Galen. "Yes, I did say that, didn't I? Well, it's because of your disappearance."

"It is?"

"Of course, I tried to keep things quiet. I didn't say anything to anyone when you up and vanished. But when you didn't leave that evening to go home, two of McClatchy's boys, the ones assigned to keep an eye on you, they called your disappearance in."

A curse formed on my lips, but I held it back.

"Of course, Bob would be getting involved," I said. "My disappearance would've been reported as a suspected kidnapping, or worse."

"This all seemed to be tied in with that body you're looking for, the one we named Connor MacLeod. So, McClatchy impounded it, had it put in the chiller's vault."

I could scarcely believe my ears. My gaze swiveled to the double-locked chamber in the next room. Shelly nodded when she saw my questioning glance.

"I've got the keys sitting on my desk. Third door on the right when you pass the entryway to the chiller," Shelly said, and she looked up at Galen again. Then she turned her Texan drawl up a notch. "Darlin', would you mind getting those keys for us?"

"Certainly," Galen said.

No sooner had he left than Shelly guided me towards the vault, chattering non-stop.

"Whoo! You know how to pick 'em, Dayna. And here I thought that you'd never get back with a man."

"Shelly, it's not what you think."

"Oh, I'm sure it ain't," she said, brushing off my statement with a wave of her hand. "It's better! He's what, six foot six? Muscled top to bottom? And that mane of hair…I'm guessing he's a Leo, right?"

“I haven’t asked,” I replied, as we came up to the steel wall of the vault. “But I’m pretty sure he’s a Sagittarius.”

“You think so?”

“It’d be really appropriate. Look, he’s only staying at my place temporarily. Until he goes back…back to where he came from.”

“Oh, spare me, Dayna.” She leaned in closer. “You don’t lower that wall of yours for all that many people. If Galen’s staying at your place, I just know that there’s more to it. What’s he like? Come on, dear, you can tell Shelly.”

“Fine,” I said, as I ran my hands over the two king-sized Master Locks on the vault door. “You want to know the truth? He’s hung like a horse.”

“I knew it!”

The jingle of keys on a chain announced Galen’s return. He smiled another winsome grin at Shelly as he handed them over. She fumbled the first attempt at opening the locks, but in no time, she’d rolled out the examination table with poor Connor MacLeod’s body on it.

“I take it…that you’ve been cutting him?” Galen said, swallowing hard. “Doing what you wanted to do with King Benedict?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Sorry if this offends you, Galen.”

“I’m fine,” he sighed. “It just takes some getting used to.”

“Honey, step back and sit down,” Shelly said, nodding at a chair in the corner. “Won’t do us any good if you upchuck in here.”

“That sounds to me like a sensible idea. Quite.”

Galen moved to the seat, which I noted was still high enough so that he could see the body. I took a second look, too. The scale-like patterns on Connor’s skin had deepened into a dark mush of purple lines. A deep set of bruises that would never heal.

“Shelly figured a medieval origin for at least one of the weapons that killed this man,” I said, and Galen nodded. “She found a chunk of metal in one of the open slashes. I concurred, because I figured out that the pattern on the skin came from wearing chain mail.”

The Wizard perked up at that. Galen got up and came back to the table. A deep frown beetled his brow.

“Surely, that can’t be right,” he said.

“It better be. What else could make those patterns?”

“I don’t doubt your expertise in this, Dayna,” Galen raised a hand, indicated the purple scale marks on the upper chest and arms. “And… yes, these marks are definitely in a mail pattern. Remember, my people are quite skilled at smithing mail rings. I know a good deal about the making and wearing of mail, and this doesn’t make sense.”

“If these marks come from mail, what doesn’t make sense?” This from Shelly. “Iron rings against skin would compress the epithelium, form the marks.”

“If the rings were against *skin*, Milady Richardson. But that’s not how it works. Neither of you have worn chain mail, I take it?”

“It’s not something I look for in the Nordstrom’s catalog,” I admitted.

“One does not wear mail against naked flesh. An undercoat or vest of leather is placed beneath. For the rings to impress the skin through that would require a tremendous amount of force.”

I pointed to the gaping wound where the man’s sternum should have been. “What about the firebolt that made the chest crater here?”

“Even that wouldn’t be enough,” Galen said, shaking his head. He paused for a moment before adding, “Unless the bolt was modified. Charged with more power than normal.”

“And why would someone do that?” I prompted.

“Dayna, in my world, there are artifacts that one could wear to shrug off a magical attack. Medallions, rings. These pieces are rare, very rare. Typically, they’re only worn by the nobility.”

“What about King Benedict?”

“Well, he’d probably have the best protection he could get. He was the king, after all.” Galen stared at me, comprehending. “And if you knew that you couldn’t harm him with magic…”

“You’d use a weapon from my world,” I concluded. “Like a high-powered rifle.”

“And you could collect any magical artifacts from your victims after they died. We know that the killer walked right up to Benedict to finish him. It wouldn’t have taken more than a moment to remove a ring or medallion.”

“When you all are done talking, fill me in,” Shelly interjected. “Because I think I’ve missed the train pulling out of the station on this one.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll fill you in later, I promise. We’ve been working on this case, and we’re under some time pressure.”

“That’s no problem, Dayna. Though you might be interested in one last thing we found. When McClatchy claimed the body as evidence, it allowed me to run some more detailed blood work.”

“Find anything interesting?”

“Hypercalcemia.” Galen gave her a blank look, so she added, “Extremely high levels of calcium in the blood. Definitely a warning sign of chronic kidney disease.”

I paused. “Bad enough to be symptomatic?”

“Oh, I reckon that he’d have had symptoms, all right. But we came up with zero signs of drugs in his system—legal or otherwise. Like he’d been managing this condition without a real doctor.”

“Or a doctor from his own world,” I said. A bunch of impressions came to me in a rush. Like my cranial switchboard just lit up, connected things with that same oddball *click*.

Albess Thea had said something similar to me. That she had difficulties ‘passing water’. That until recently, some of the nobles also had that problem.

Until recently?

Next, Thea had casually mentioned that owls and humans remedied things the same way. By consuming juniper berries. Before we’d been interrupted, I could have sworn that she’d handed me a made-for-Dayna riddle.

Juniper berries helped one to ‘nose out the truth’.

To help one go beyond the lids that can close.

To shut out the lies.

Where had I smelled juniper? Once? Twice?

Twice, I think. The memories swirled in my head, tantalizing, just out of reach. Then one memory came home to roost. When I first found Connor’s body.

“Are you all right?” Shelly put a hand out, but I stopped her. “You

look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just a moment," I said softly. I'd been looking over the body at the construction site. Detective Alanzo Esteban had been at my side. Right before Bob McClatchy had dug out his Vick's ointment.

Go beyond the lids that can close. Shut out the lies.

I closed my eyes. Leaned forward over the pungent, fragrant corpse, and let my sense of smell do the work.

The charred, gamey smell of decomposing flesh. Sulfur, charcoal. And then, something else underneath the charred-sulfur odor. Dry, delicate like lace.

Gin-like.

And what kind of berry did one use to flavor gin?

I didn't like the connections my mind was putting together. But I had to know if I was right. In a flash, I grabbed a scalpel from the set of tools placed at the head of the examination table.

I put the bright, gleaming filament of the blade down low, by the side of the corpse's organ cavity. Galen let out a gasp, and Shelly looked at me strangely.

"Dayna, what are you–"

I ignored her and cut deep into the underlying tissue. Soon, I had the gap large enough to accommodate my clenched fist.

Without a second thought, I plunged my gloved hand into the wound.

Searching.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Galen and Shelly watched me as I pushed my hand deeper into the corpse.

Shelly with curiosity, Galen with something akin to horror. My fingers pushed and probed, searching. Then they closed around something small and hard. I continued deeper and came across another object. Then a third.

I'd found it.

Found *them*.

I pulled my hand back out. Gore the color of rotting plums coated my protective glove from the wrist on down. I unclenched my fist, and there, wobbling in my palm, were a trio of irregularly shaped white pebbles.

"Calcium deposits," Shelly said, nodding. "I gather that means something to you two? 'Cause I'm still wandering in the dark, here."

I started to reply when I heard the heavy tread of a man's footsteps approaching. I grimaced. No other doors down here. No other ways out. A shadow appeared just outside the room. I quickly motioned to Galen.

"Let me handle this," I whispered. "Just stay quiet unless you're spoken to."

"Very well."

My heart sank as the shadow resolved into the form of Deputy Chief Bob McClatchy. He wore a new gray pinstriped suit over his broad frame, one which made him look like a shark who'd been to the buffet table too many times. His eyes grew wide as he saw me at the side of the body.

"Dayna Chrissie! What in blazes…" he started to say.

"Look, I can explain."

"Like hell you'd better explain, Chrissie!" McClatchy's florid face grew a shade redder as he began to work himself into a lather. "I don't care if you're a damned private contractor this time, either! I've got

three whole squads dedicated to finding you, and here you are at work?"

"I guess that shows how good you are at detective work," I said. "Have you ever considered becoming a beat cop? You have the chops for it."

"Don't get smart with me," McClatchy dug a tissue out of his pocket to shield his nose from the smell of the ripe body in the room. With the tissue held in place, he raised a finger and looked set to continue berating me. Until he noticed Galen at my side. "And who're you supposed to be?"

"Him?" I said, stepping to Galen's side. "This is my brother, Galen Chrissie. He's about the only part of my family I've still got left in Chicago."

"You've never said anything about having a brother."

"That's because you've never asked me about my family," I said pointedly. "He's thinking about med school. Maybe following in my footsteps. So I had him join me and Shelly here today."

"Yeah, the boy's got potential. Lots of potential," Shelly added, a touch too eagerly, I thought.

"Never mind that," McClatchy said dismissively. "How did you shake the two men I had assigned to you?"

"I didn't do anything special," I said, lying through my teeth. Hell, in for a penny, in for a pound, I guess. Plus, Bob just plain got on my nerves.

"Nothing gets by the cops from my division!"

"Yeah, nothing gets by your men, Bob. So long as it's glazed, powdered, or sprinkled."

McClatchy made a strangled sound and advanced towards me.

"You better watch yourself, Chrissie. Or I could have you out on the street in a snap." To illustrate the point, Bob did snap his fingers, right under my nose. "I could have your state license yanked. Or even worse–"

"Even worse?" Galen's deep basso voice sounded close to my ear as he leaned over me protectively. "Might I ask what you have in mind?"

McClatchy's countenance paled as the sound of Galen cracking his knuckles echoed in the room. He pulled his cellphone out, hit a single button for speed dial, and growled a single, terse message.

"Chrissie's in the chiller room. Get down here, now." He hung up and glared at me impotently. "I'm putting you under house arrest."

"On what charge?" I demanded.

"Interfering with a police investigation."

"Last I checked, that's a misdemeanor, Bob." Over his shoulder, I saw Alanzo Esteban come into the room. Esteban's face lit up when he spotted me, and then darkened as he saw Galen.

"That's right, Chrissie. Very good. You should go to law school someday," McClatchy said mirthlessly. "That's why I'm not showing you the inside of a cell. You're going to head back home, and you're staying there until I call for you."

"Until you can come up with a better charge?"

"I don't need to charge you with a crime. I'll just drag you in front of the disciplinary board. Once they hear how you've diverted my department's time and resources from a pending murder case, we'll see how long you stay with the LAPD."

"You're all heart, Bob," Shelly said, over the rims of her pince-nez glasses.

"So glad you noticed." With a jerk of his head, he added, "Esteban's going to keep a close eye on you and your brother until then. As a courtesy, of course."

And on that pleasant note, McClatchy stomped out of the room. Esteban didn't come over or say hello. He simply crossed his arms and waited silently in the background as we put the corpse back into storage, de-gowned, and went back upstairs to the main lobby.

"It might be a while before I get back here," I said to Shelly. "Keep an eye on things for me, would you?"

"Goes without saying," she replied. With a pointed glance at Esteban, she added, "Don't let the bastards get you down, no matter how big they might be."

I hugged her. "Thank you, Shelly."

She turned to Galen and added, "You keep her safe now, you

hear?"

"I shall, Milady," he said. Shelly gave him a last peck on the cheek. With that, Galen and I exited through security with Esteban in tow.

We drove back home through the rush-hour traffic in silence. As usual, it was bumper-to-bumper along the freeway. Esteban followed our SUV in his own unmarked police cruiser. He didn't bother with being inconspicuous. I pulled the Expedition into the garage as Esteban took up a parking spot across the street from my front door.

"Galen, wait for me inside," I instructed. He nodded, and I walked across the green-tinted moonscape I called my front lawn over to Esteban's car. He didn't lower his window until I rapped on it. Even then, he only opened it a crack.

"What do you want?" Esteban's warm Latino accent had turned ice cold. His eyes looked haunted and he'd let his day-old beard stubble get another day's growth in without shaving.

"What do I want? For starters, some common courtesy," I shot back. "I'd think that's the very least I deserve."

"You've got funny notions about what you 'deserve', señora del acero. Do you think I'm blind? I see what's going on here."

"You do?"

"Yes! You disappear for a day and a half—giving me a wonderfully sleepless night, thank you very much—and you show up with your 'brother'?"

"Galen's here for a very special reason."

"Oh, I'll bet. You forgot one thing, Dayna. You and me, we've been on cases together. We've talked about our families. You've got a sister, yes. Never a brother mentioned, oh no."

I bit my tongue. "Maybe I forgot–"

"You don't forget things like that," he said with a pained expression. "Look, if you want to be with him, you do that without playing make-believe."

That's when it hit me like an effing thunderclap.

"Esteban? You're *jealous!*"

"Why would I be? I'm only the man who saved your life, that's

all."

I pondered that for a moment. Damn it, I did like him. Given the circumstances, I didn't even know if I'd be alive in the next day or two. And I didn't have time right now to protest my innocence.

Luckily, one thing spoke louder than words.

"Esteban," I said, rapping the glass, "lower the damned window, please."

He did so.

I leaned inside, grabbed the back of his head, and drew him in. His lips, warm and wet, met mine in a kiss that rocked me to my core. It took a while—a nice, long while—before I released him and stood next to his car, appraising his expression. Somewhere east of poetry and west of horny, to my guess. I put my hands on my hips and addressed him one final time.

"For the record," I stated, "Galen doesn't get that."

Esteban's smile looked blissful. I winked at him and left him to watch over the house. Nice to know I could still make a man's toes curl, and more.

I went through the garage, closing the door as I did so. Made my way through the house to the back and joined Galen as he searched the horizon to the north. The puffball clouds above turned bright pink as the sun set.

"Here he comes," Galen said. I was about to ask which 'he' Galen meant, when with a near-silent swoosh of wings, Shaw came in at a low bank to land just upslope of the house.

When I said a 'low' bank, that's just what I meant, too. The griffin had come in from the uninhabited side of the park, skimmed at treetop level, and then dropped down into the yard with scarcely a sound. Shaw's move must've worked, too. I didn't hear Esteban banging on the front door, demanding to know why an eagle-headed lion had landed in my back yard.

I made a low whistle in appreciation. Without armor or riders to burden them, griffins were a lot stealthier and more maneuverable than I'd thought. In fact, the ruffling sound of the vinyl banner as it fluttered to earth behind the griffin made more noise than he did on

touchdown. He folded his wings and raised his head, looking every inch the majestic creature he was.

"Shaw!" I said, and I came up to throw my arms around his neck. He let out a *churr* of appreciation. "Guess I was more worried about you than I thought."

"Nay, there was no need," the griffin said. "'Twas an uneventful day. Unless thy Wizard's charm proved off, I got no signal."

"I doubt my magic would fail at such a mundane task," Galen said, amused. "And I was likewise concerned for you."

"Thou shouldst reserve concern for our fayleene friend," Shaw said. "Should danger arise, I am able to fight my way through."

"Liam's capable in his own way," I said, craning my neck to look at my neighbor's yards. I had a pretty big slice of property, with trees and high wooden fencing, but it was still pretty light out. "We'd better get you inside, Shaw."

The griffin squeezed through my back door, sniffing with his beak as he did so. "Have my senses gone tricksy? Doth that be pork I smell?"

"It is," I called inside. "It's in the kitchen sink. Try not to get it on the carpet or anything, okay?"

I think I heard an answer in the affirmative. Right before the homey sound of meat being ripped from bone came from the kitchen. Judging by the noise, I hoped that Shaw wasn't tearing up the kitchen floor. Or eating the linoleum, for that matter.

"Where is Liam?" I said impatiently. I began to pace as the sky went from salmon pink to blood red. Any appetite I had vanished as my stomach rumbled out of sheer nervousness.

"Be still! I hear something," Galen said. I heard it too, a moment later. The sound of some animal blundering through the tall grass at the edge of the slope.

"That can't be him, Galen. fayleene move too silently for that."

I had to eat my words. Liam stumbled from the underbrush and into my yard, tottering back and forth on his skinny deer legs. He staggered forward, trying to reach the house. The fading sunset turned the white spots on his side arterial red.

“Liam!” I ran to him, Galen at my side. I knelt in front of the little fayleene, who shook his head side to side, as if he were drunk. “Liam, what’s wrong?”

I ran my hands over his flanks, his legs. I couldn’t find a wound. He seemed whole enough. Then he turned his head, and I saw the deer tag that had been punched through his ear.

“What’s wrong?” The fayleene prince’s words were clear, even through a hurt-sounding snuffle. “You would not *believe* the day I’ve had!”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Something had gone wrong.

I knew it from the moment that Liam staggered out from the underbrush, tottering into my back yard like the newborn fawn he resembled. As I knelt before him, the fayleene prince sank to his knees. He turned his head so that his antlers faced away from me, and lay down with his head in my lap.

I felt myself melt at the sight of Liam's emerald-green eye as he looked up at me. He let out a snuffle as I gently brushed his ear. A yellow tag labeled *CA Dpt. F & G* hung on a little plastic circlet that had been punched through the lower part of the lobe.

"It's okay, you're safe now," I said, soothing him. I felt a nudge at my shoulder. Galen handed me a pair of metallic clippers he'd pulled from a jacket pocket. "Tell us what happened while I get this off you, okay?"

"I was just minding my own business," Liam began. "I stayed off the roads and paths, like you said to, Dayna. I'd found a nice high spot up on the ridge and suddenly, I felt pain. Like a bee sting, on my shoulder."

I got the blade of the clipper around the circle of clear, hard plastic. It had a couple splotches of Liam's blood on it, the color of dried berries.

Chokeberries, maybe. I shuddered at that and pushed the image aside. I wanted to tell Liam about what had happened all those years ago, but now was not the time or place for it.

"All of a sudden, I felt sleepy! Like I'd run all night without pause and then went to bask in the sun."

I nodded, understanding. A dart from a tranquilizer gun. Another item from my world that Liam probably wouldn't have dreamed of.

"I heard someone coming and tried to run, but I got all tangle-footed and fell down. Everything went black. And when I woke up–"

"Yes?" With a squeeze, I cut the plastic fastener in half and

threaded it through the pea-sized hole in Liam's ear.

"When I woke up, I was lying prone on my side, all stretched out. That thing was in my ear," he said, nudging the tag in my hand. "And there was this man kneeling over me."

Liam's voice wavered between outrage and embarrassment. If fayleene could blush, I'd have bet that Liam's face would've gone as red as the sun setting behind us.

"He…he was taking my temperature. Back there!" he squeaked, and his little triangular, puff-ball of a tail flicked twice in emphasis. "And it was…it was *cold!*"

"You poor thing," I said, stroking him again.

"How ever did you get away?" Galen asked.

"Well," Liam said, snuffling again, "I forgot that Dayna told us not to talk to anyone. I raised my head, looked at the man, and said: *'Do you really have to do that?'* And…well, he *fainted!*"

"Truly, a brave escape," Galen said, completely straight-faced. And of course, that came too damned close to making me bust up. I didn't dare. The California Department of Fish and Game had already badly manhandled a member of fayleene royalty—albeit unknowingly—and I wasn't about to rub that in.

"Come on inside, Liam," I coaxed. "Let's get some dinner for you. I'm sorry they tagged you, but you'll be all right in a little bit. The…protectors of our forests, they shot you with a dart that makes you go to sleep."

"I wish they hadn't done that." Liam got up and walked, slowly, to the house with us. He grumbled under his breath. "Wish they hadn't pierced my ear, either."

Shaw lay sprawled on the kitchen floor, gnawing contentedly on a ham bone. He looked up as we came in and cocked his head in appraisal.

"Thou wishes they wouldn't have what?"

"Shaw," I said, "let him be for now. We'll fill you in later."

The griffin shrugged and went back to his gnawing. The gristly noise of beak on bone sounded like someone shaving ice with a squeaky metal ratchet.

Galen filled a bowl of water and set it in front of Liam. With a sigh, the fayleene plunged his muzzle into the cool liquid. Next, the Wizard pulled out the last head of lettuce I had in the crisper, set it on my cutting board, and began to chop it into bite-sized chunks with a handy knife. He didn't look up as he spoke.

"Dayna, now that we've all come home to roost, I believe that it is time for you to tell us all what you've learned about Benedict's killer. I have been more than patient in waiting for you to tell me what conclusions you have drawn."

Liam stopped his soft slurping at the water bowl. Shaw paused his gnawing in mid-chew. Galen put the chopped lettuce down on the floor for Liam and looked at me expectantly.

"I'd like to know why you cut open the body at the morgue," he said. "And what were those things you pulled out of it?"

I started to reply, but no words came out. My throat felt dry, parched. Damn it, I knew the truth, but I didn't want to say it. Like somehow, the act of speaking would make it more real.

"That body," I said, "the one you called the 'foreign ambassador'?"

"Yes, the one from the coastal regions."

"That was no ambassador. It's Duke Kajari."

Liam and Shaw stayed silent. Galen recoiled as if I'd slapped him.

"What are you saying?"

"The Kajari you've been serving for the past fortnight or more? He's an actor. A fake. The real Duke is lying on the slab in the M.E.'s office."

"But…how?"

"Albess Thea knows," I said grimly. "Somehow, she knows. And she's aware that no one's going to take her seriously without proof. But in your world, she's this kind of cross between Mother Theresa and the Speaker of the House."

Galen struggled to figure out what I meant. "You mean that she can't simply investigate on her own. Because she's too visible."

"Got it in one. That's why she came up with the idea of bringing in someone from another world as an investigator. It's why Duke Kajari—the one sitting on the Andeluvian throne, right now—fought

against the idea. That's why she told me that the Kajari I was dealing with was a fraud."

"I still don't understand, Dayna," Galen said, "How did the Albess tell you?"

"She couldn't do it outright," I said, as I leaned against the countertop. "She didn't feel safe enough for that. Too many ears about. So she told me in a roundabout way."

"How very much like an owl."

"She mentioned that she and 'some of the nobles at court' had kidney issues. Andeluvia treats kidney problems the way we used to, up to the last century. Today, we use drugs. Back then, we used what you do: herbal lore. Specifically, juniper berries."

Galen nodded. "I do recall the Duke having fresh ones brought down from the mountains, once a week. How did this information convince you that the real Kajari is the one back in your morgue?"

I tapped my nose. "Because I know the scent of gin. It's dry, acidic, and reminds me of old juniper. It's the scent of a gin-drinker, and that's what I smelled on that body in the morgue. Once Shelly mentioned the high calcium content of the blood, I knew I had to check once and for all."

"Check for what?"

"Kidney stones. That's what I pulled out of that body. It's the only reason anyone would ingest quantities of juniper berries—to de-calcify urine."

"Thy logic is sound, as it goes," Shaw interjected. "The false Kajari, then. Who might he be?"

"I don't know. But either he's a powerful wizard, or he's got one on his side. Someone in Galen's weight class."

Galen bristled a little at that. "And as I told you before, I'd know if anyone capable of that level of power were to open a door to another world! The wizards of Andeluvia have watched and recorded these events for centuries. No one's ever done more than remotely scry on your world."

"Then someone's figured out a way to block or confound you," I retorted. "Galen, twenty years ago, someone opened a portal to my

world from yours. My father and I…we encountered one of the fayleene."

Liam gave me a strange look. "You've met my kind before? Why did you not say so?"

"It's…Liam, it's difficult." I said, abruptly embarrassed. "I want to tell you. But now's not the right time. I promise, I'll tell you later."

"I recall hearing that phrase come from your lips earlier today, Dayna," Galen said sternly. "When would you be scheduling this 'later'?"

"Galen, you don't know what's going on!" I came back at him.

"Do I not? If you're right, I've been serving a traitor to the throne." His face bore a pained expression as he added, "One who murdered my King."

"Enough, 'ere I grow sick," Shaw declared, with a stamp that made the house shudder. "Quench thy sorrow, Wizard. Dip it in the blood of your enemy. Return us hither to Andeluvia and we will end this!"

"Yes!" Liam agreed. "I say we go back."

"I don't like it!" I interjected. "He'll be prepared, waiting for us. We need to catch him here, where we can take the advantage!"

"Then we reveal the villain to the Andeluvian court," Galen insisted.

"That's too damned risky! He knows he's in a highly exposed spot there. He'll have something ready. If he has allies, like Master Seer Zenos, they'll be there, ready to strike."

"Dayna," Galen said, "truly, I like your idea of catching our opponent on the off-hoof. But we must finish this in Andeluvia, for if our foe will not come to your world–"

The Wizard's voice faded as the kitchen was bathed in blue light. Shaw looked down in surprise at his medallion, which sparkled like a neon sapphire.

Liam's ears perked up. The fur on the back of his neck stood at attention. As if the fayleene prince had touched his nose to an electric generator.

"He's here," Liam whispered. "He's crossed over."

“You mean–”

“Yes. He’s in *this* world now.”

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Chapter Thirty

Right then, standing in my kitchen, I felt fear lay its cold fingers on my shoulders as if I'd walked into the chiller room at the morgue. I knew that Duke Kajari—whoever he really was—would come to my world. I'd counted on it, as a matter of fact.

But Liam's hushed announcement made it real. Threatening. Cold.

"He's here," the fayleene princeling repeated. Fur bristled all over Liam's body. His ears lay down flat against his skull. Classic signs of alarm.

"Right," I said. "Can you tell where he is?"

Liam looked up. "I'm sorry, Dayna."

"Shaw," I said hurriedly, "maybe if you get airborne…"

But Galen shook his head. The bright blue glow of Shaw's medallion dimmed like a flashlight running on dying batteries. The griffin reached up with a forepaw and batted the medallion once or twice in irritation, but the light died out.

"I could only give it a single, brief charge," Galen said, apologetically.

"Dammit!" I cursed. Frustrated, I stalked out to the living room. I flicked the lights on in irritation as the dim evening light finally failed. Think. There had to be something I could do.

There just had to be something.

Behind me, Galen cleared his throat. Liam and Shaw stood in his shadow.

"Dayna, we each feel the disappointment in our bones," Galen said. "But maybe we'll have to draw Kajari out. Be the bait."

"I don't want to put any of you at risk," I said crossly. "Our one chance at surprise, and we blew it! We need to find this Kajari, shut him down now!"

Galen shook his head in acknowledgement. And right then, in the middle of the silence that followed, Liam spoke up.

"Perhaps…I mean…is it really necessary? To find Kajari's

impostor? What if we set our sights towards something else?"

I wasn't sure where Liam was going with this. But now wasn't the time to be critical. Oh, heck no.

"That burst of magic just then…it was enough to give me the sense of it. The 'spoor of the spell', we fayleene call it."

"Enough to track with?"

"Not the person who cast it, no." Liam said, with a flick of his punctured ear. "I'd have to be a lot closer to the source of the spell. Magic doesn't linger on people, on any kind of living thing. But magic leaves traces on other things. Objects."

I considered it. If I understood this right, this was just like fingerprinting. It was hard to leave a print on someone's skin. But on a drinking glass or a countertop, that was easy.

"There's several things here in your house that have Galen's trace on it. But now that I've scented this new magic…there's one trace which I thought was Galen's but is not. It must be Kajari's."

Liam stepped up to me and nudged my jacket with his nose. I dug my hand into my pocket. Pulled out the bullets that I'd analyzed back in the lab.

"I can't use this to find Kajari, but I think I can locate the rifle."

"We can use that," I said, heart pounding. "We find that weapon, we find Kajari."

Liam paused for a second. "But Dayna, this vast city of yours, it confuses me, confounds me like a labyrinth. I don't think I can direct you, don't think I can convey what I see in my mind. Unless…"

"Speak thy mind, fayleene prince," urged Shaw.

"Unless you join your minds to my own."

"Liam, this will be very taxing on you," Galen warned. "The poison from the dart was quite potent. You are still fighting it."

"My unluckiness is my own curse, my own problem to deal with," Liam said, with a stamp of one hoof. "Dayna's right. We must take this chance."

Galen began to object. He thought better of it, and simply nodded.

"Gather round me," Liam said. "Galen, Dayna…when I tell you to, each of you place a hand on my antlers. Then lay your other hand on

Shaw."

I came to stand on the fayleene princeling's left. Liam's muzzle felt cool and wet as he nudged open my palm and gently look one of the bullets in his teeth. I returned the remaining pieces of metal to my pocket as he placed the bullet on my carpet. He carefully traced a circle around the bullet with his nose, and then placed his forehoof firmly on it.

Liam murmured under his breath. I recognized the liquid, musical tones of what Galen had called the 'Old Tongue' of the fayleene.

"*Cith piléar a chaitheamh ley duine,*" he recited. He repeated himself once, twice, three times. A flicker of light ran from the tips of his antlers down to his hooves. The air around us felt charged, moist, somehow electrical.

Galen stood across from me. To his right, Shaw's mountain of fur and feather overshadowed the diminutive fayleene. But the griffin watched Liam work respectfully, almost in awe. And then Liam spoke again, his words sounding deeper, somehow more resonant.

"Close the circle."

Gingerly, I reached out and laid my hand on the cool, bony nub of his broken antler. Galen grasped the other. We gasped as a tingle, like a tiny static shock, arced through our skin. Together, we each lay a palm on one of Shaw's massive shoulders. The griffin shivered as he felt the sensation.

The sight of my companions began to undulate. To ripple. As if my vision were a disturbed pool of water. Then, overlaid on top of what I saw, came a mist-filled hint of someplace else.

Somewhere up high. I got the feeling of looking out over something. Not over something big, like a view of the mountains. A courtyard?

Somewhere noisy. The noise, the bustle of crowds of people. From below, outside. A constantly shifting, changing crowd of people.

Somewhere with lots of color. Lighting. I heard a dull, ear-tickling crackle. It wouldn't mean anything to my companions, but it did to me. The sound of flickering neon signs.

The cool glint of a rifle barrel. Red and green motes of light

danced along the black of the metal. The viewpoint pulled back. Pulled away. Outside.

A throng of people crammed into a large courtyard. Steep-sided, gaudy roofs of red and green tile. A brace of king-sized klieg lights that could illuminate the side of a building.

The sounds of an excited crowd, background buzz of neon, honking car horns on a jammed street. The smell of asphalt, fresh concrete, and… freshly buttered popcorn?

The scene blinked out and the dim confines of my living room reappeared. Galen and I each staggered backwards a step. Shaw let out a snort. Eyes intent, he lunged forward and down. The whip-fast griffin got his feathered head under Liam's as the fayleene collapsed, cushioning his fall.

"Thank you," Liam said, after a moment.

"Think naught upon it," Shaw replied.

Galen laid a hand on Liam's brow. The Wizard frowned, and then put his fingers to the fayleene's neck. Liam's fur lay flat against his skin, matted and shiny with droplets of sweat.

"You are close to burning out your candle," Galen said. "You must leave time to recuperate. Preferably someplace dark and quiet."

"Wait," Liam replied. He blinked slowly, owlishly, as if his eyes had trouble focusing. "Dayna? Did you see? Enough to know where to go?"

"Yes," I said, "I saw enough. And you've done enough, too."

"You may need me…"

"We certainly do need you. But if you don't let us take it from here, then none of us will get the chance to be heroes."

I motioned to Galen, and he gathered up the little fayleene in his powerful arms. I opened the door to my guest room, went to the bed, and pulled aside the top sheet. The Wizard gently put Liam down on the mattress. I swaddled him up as best I could so that he'd stay warm.

"No magic for the next few hours," Galen said firmly. "Rest. Sleep."

"Understood, Wizard," Liam replied sleepily. But he raised his

head one last time. “But I must speak with Dayna. Alone.”

Galen nodded and retreated to the living room.

“I watched your face when you said that you’d encountered one of my kind before,” Liam said, his voice drained and weak. “I saw sadness. Grief. Shame. Before you leave…I want to know why.”

So I told him. Liam’s eyes didn’t waver from mine as I told him about the coldness of the winter day. The trail of blood glistening in the snow. Daddy’s sobbing confession of what he’d done.

It turned out that Daddy wasn’t the only one who felt he needed confession.

I wrung my hands. It seemed impossible to keep my fingers still. Warm tears trickled down my cheeks as I finished the story.

“I know it can’t make up for what happened,” I choked out, “but I’m sorry.”

Liam lay his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Perspective,” he whispered. “I understand better now.”

I didn’t. But I stayed at his side, silent, until he spoke again.

“What happened was a terrible thing. But it didn’t involve you. It didn’t involve me. Different people, different time, different place.”

“Different perspective?” I ventured.

“Mayhap. I was told once, at a critical moment in my life, that all events, even ones you think bad, must be viewed in perspective.”

“It’s good advice to get at a…critical moment.”

“Life has been troubled for me, Dayna. Very troubled. A fayleene without luck is deemed unfit. Unworthy of association. Unworthy of friendship. One dark autumn night, I traveled to the peak above the forest’s highest waterfall.”

His voice grew softer. I had to move closer to the bed to hear him.

“I remember that the rocks below looked like slick, black teeth in the moonlight. And yet, the water that plunged among them sounded so inviting. The rush of the fall sounded like…release. I remember trying to run through all the reasons that I should not leap from that high place. I didn’t find any. And that’s when I heard something else.”

“What did you hear?”

“A female voice. I thought it was the lead doe, come to upbraid me yet again. But it was someone else. She told me that she’d seen my troubles, that my fellow fayleene had misjudged me. That ‘luck’ wasn’t a power. It was a ‘perspective’. Like all events in life itself. She told me that the only true waste would be to despair. To give in.”

“And you did not.”

“I did not.”

“I’m grateful she spoke to you,” I said truthfully. “Who was she?”

“I don’t know, Dayna,” Liam’s expression came as close to a wistful smile as a deer’s face could. “But she was the most beautiful owl I’ve ever seen.”

And with that, Liam’s eyes closed. I wiped my tears away, listened to the smooth sound of his breathing. I turned off the light before leaving and closed the bedroom door as I did so.

I pulled a road map from a closet shelf and spread it out on the kitchen table. Galen and Shaw joined me. Galen had removed the griffin’s medallion. He stuck it in a handy pocket as Shaw cleared his throat with a rumble.

“Our fayleene companion remains amongst us?”

“He’s resting,” I said, “which is more than we’ll be doing. We’ve got quite a drive ahead of us, gentlemen.”

“And with combat at the end of it,” Galen said grimly. “I doubt that Kajari would return to this world and remain apart from his weapon of choice for long.”

Shaw flexed a set of his talons, which glinted evilly. “So be it. ’Tis time to flush the game from its hiding-hole.”

“Now you get to see up close what I was talking about,” I said, glancing at Galen. “When I drew up that sign I made for Shaw earlier.”

Galen’s gaze slowly traveled to the spot I indicated on the map with my index finger.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Galen and Shaw squinted at the spot on the map I indicated. Smack dab in the middle of downtown, only two blocks from the Medical Examiner's building. Their look remained puzzled as they read the inscription.

"*Grauman's Chinese Theatre.*" Galen recited. "Am I correct that this place appears to be more than a few miles distant?"

"You've got that right."

"Will your friend 'Esteban' not object? Strongly, at that?"

"Esteban's okay. I'll handle him," I said, trying to find the right words, "He just doesn't like…well, how I've had to think outside the box lately."

Galen paused for a moment to absorb that. "I gather that 'thinking outside the box' means to look at things from a different angle."

"That's right. It's how I'm wired, how I was trained. One of my instructors once told me: If you hear hoof beats, don't always think 'horses'. Sometimes, you have to think 'zebras'."

"That's an interesting way of putting it," Galen said. "Whenever I hear hoof beats, I think 'centaurs'."

Shaw made a throaty chuckle. It made me grin too. Yeah, it sort of made sense that Galen would think in that manner.

That's when my brain went *click* again.

When you hear hoof beats, think 'centaurs'.

My mind felt like it was trying to latch onto something. Something that didn't make sense on its own.

"Something's been bothering me from the start of all this," I announced. "What, really, was the motive for murdering Benedict?"

"'Tis always the same with humans," Shaw intoned. "In the end, for Power."

"I agree," Galen said. "It must be what false-Kajari wants. Why else go to the trouble of killing a king?"

"There's two problems with that. First, if you wanted to seize

power, you'd have to murder Benedict *and* his only heir to the throne. Second, why kill Benedict in a way that would plunge the kingdom—now your kingdom—into near-certain war with the centaurs?"

"Thou art more enlightened than I," Shaw said, with a shake of his head.

"Both of those problems vanish when you realize that our fake Duke has a completely different goal in mind. He doesn't want the throne of *Andeluvia*. He wants the throne of the *Centaur Realm*."

Both griffin and centaur stared at me as if I'd sprouted fayleene antlers. I felt my face grow hot under their bemused looks. Undaunted, I continued.

"I'm not crazy," I insisted. "It all makes sense. Everything Kajari's done has pushed Andeluvia towards open battle with the centaurs. In Andeluvia, he doesn't have to go out on the front line! Nobles like Lord Behnaz or Captain Vazura will be happy to do so in his stead. But on the centaur's side, Angbor will be out in front. Even if he isn't killed in action, it'd be easy to use a rifle during the chaos of a battle. Then he could step in, take the throne without a fight."

"I am trying very hard to follow you," Galen said carefully. "But, praytell, why would a human wish to rule my people?"

I locked eyes with Galen as I replied. "Because Kajari isn't a human. He's a shape-shifted centaur, just like you."

"But…how?"

"Who else would harbor a grudge against your father? Who else would have the magic to cross worlds and shape-shift? You told me yourself, Galen. The only Archmage-class wizard the centaurs ever produced. Until you."

Galen shook his head mulishly. "That can't be! That wizard, Magnus Killsheven…my father had him executed when his play for the throne failed."

"This 'Magnus' appears rather lively to mine eyes," Shaw observed, with a wry tone in his voice. "When did thy father perform this execution?"

"Twenty years ago." Galen blinked in astonishment.

"The same time that my father and I encountered a fayleene," I

finished. “Someone crossed over to this world.”

“And if they were badly hurt, or near death, they could have left a passageway open behind them,” Galen mused. He slammed a heavy fist into his palm. “You’ve convinced me, Dayna. It’s well past time to finish the execution my father began.”

* * *

I backed the Ford Expedition down the driveway and swung it into the street with a screech. The sky had gone black by now. Thick clouds that played hide and seek with the rising moon.

In the streetlamp’s glow, Esteban nearly spilled his coffee in surprise. I rolled my window down. Looked across the way as Esteban glared back at me.

“What the hell’s gotten into you, Dayna?” he demanded. “Don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten what ‘house arrest’ means!”

“I know, believe me, I know. But something more important just came up.”

“More important?” he sputtered, “McClatchy will have my head if I let you go!”

“Alanzo,” I said, and even at this juncture, I saw a twitch of a smile as he heard me use his first name. “I’m sorry, okay? I don’t have time to give you a full-on effing explanation right now!”

I didn’t wait for his response. I rolled my window back up and stomped on the accelerator. Rubber shrieked on asphalt as the SUV lurched forward like a racehorse from the starting gate.

“Sorry, guys,” I said, as I saw Esteban begin a three-point turn to follow us. “I need to get some distance between us and Officer Friendly there.”

“He doth not appear to be all that friendly,” Shaw remarked.

I jerked the steering wheel around to make a sharp right. For a split second, I saw a flash in my rearview mirror. Thought I saw the red and blue lights of a police cruiser. Too quick to tell if it was a black-and-white Crown Vic or an unmarked patrol car.

The lights vanished as I pulled up the entrance ramp to the

southbound 101. The wheel's leather rim felt warm, alive in my hands. Only light evening traffic dotting the lanes now.

My mind raced along with the SUV. Dammit, why hadn't I put the pieces together before? Not only had Thea clued me in to the berries, there'd even been a rotting bundle of juniper sitting out on Kajari's desk. The answer came back to me in a heartbeat. My own voice floated out of the darkness, mocking me.

You didn't put the pieces together because you liked him, Dayna. You liked Kajari—that is, you liked *Magnus*—as a man. If you didn't have Esteban kicking around in the back of your mind, who knows what would have happened?

And why didn't Magnus kill me when he had the chance? When he had me alone in his quarters? The same voice echoed in my head.

Because he liked you, as well.

I shuddered a little at that. But I forced myself to ask one more question. One that popped into my head when Galen revealed the centaur wizard's name.

"Galen," I said, as I powered the SUV around a clump of slow-moving traffic, "what was Duke Kajari's full name?"

"His full name?" Galen looked puzzled, and then stated, "I believe it was 'Thade'. His full name was Thade Rythalla Kajari."

If I needed any proof that Magnus liked me, I just got it. I'd made him slip up, tell me his true name. And in a way that a centaur would do it. Just as 'Sturmgalen' went by 'Galen' in the human world, so did 'Killsheven' default to 'Evan'.

I bit my lip. Tried to keep my expression neutral. I don't think it worked all that well. Galen watched me, his expression one of gentle concern.

"Dayna, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I lied, and I thanked the powers that be as I saw our exit ramp coming up. Only a couple more miles to downtown Hollywood, and to end the entire saga right here and now.

My rearview mirror lit up as, in the distance, I saw Esteban's car barreling down the freeway in hot pursuit of our SUV. He didn't have his siren on, but his grille-mounted light bar pulsed a jangle of blue

and red. Cars to either side of him gave him a wide berth as he came on.

I floored the accelerator again. We all but flew off the exit ramp and onto Highland boulevard. Heading south, down a long slope and to the right. The squeal of our tires echoed off the concrete walls of the highway underpass.

I managed to time the lights at the next three intersections just right. I swung us onto a side street just as Esteban came screeching around the wide curve of the exit ramp. I stood on the gas pedal again.

Galen gasped. I swapped the gas for the brake. Acrid smoke, the smell of burnt rubber on dirty asphalt, wafted through the vents.

Shaw's bulk slammed into the backs of the seats. Springs creaked loudly in protest. I coughed, inhaled burning brake fumes. The SUV shimmied like a drunken bar girl doing a hula. The brake pedal pulsed under my foot, as if trying to squirm free, but I held it down.

We came to a smoking, jittery stop, not ten feet from the bright orange sign.

"This cannot be good," Galen remarked.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

I sat frozen in the driver's seat, mind racing. Next to me, Galen stared at the bright orange and black sign that sat ten feet in front of the SUV's hood. Out of curiosity, Shaw poked his eagle's head between us to scan the outside. He made a leonine snort.

"Impressive," Shaw observed. "The deeds this 'Oscar' hath performed must have been worthy of a hero's veneration."

"Agreed," Galen said, "he was famous indeed, if his festival can close off a city of this size in his honor."

Sure enough, a profile shot of the little golden statuette adorned the sign. Next to the smug-looking visage of the Academy Award trophy were words done up in an art-deco font and punched up by no less than a triple exclamation point: *Oscar Rocks Hollywood Tonight @ The Classic Film Festival!!!*

That wasn't what bothered me. It was the fact that the sign adorned a set of concrete blocks placed out in the middle of the street as a traffic block. The kind thoughtfully provided by the California Department of Transportation.

And on the blocked street beyond? Vendors finishing the setup of their booths in the new traffic-free zone. Pop music blared from overhead speakers. Aromas of hot dogs, French fries, and Mexican churros made the entire area smell like a cross between a Dodger's game and the county fair.

I kept going through the road system in my head. This wasn't the normal route I took to work—but I was familiar with the streets here. Grauman's Chinese Theatre pretty much lay at the center of 'Old Hollywood'. No back way in. No side alleys to get around.

I *really* didn't like the remaining option.

With the tinny sound of hot tires on asphalt, Esteban's unmarked police cruiser, lights flashing, came around the corner, several blocks back.

Looked like the decision had been made for me.

“Okay, guys,” I said, as I flexed my hands on the warm leather of the steering wheel. “Hang on!”

I threw the Ford into reverse for a second, cutting around to the right. I braked hard. The transmission howled in protest like a whipped dog as I slammed it back into drive.

Floored the gas again. Smell of burning rubber as the rear wheels fought for purchase. Sound of talons scraping metal came from the back as Shaw dug in, trying to avoid sliding around in the cargo area.

With a *whump*, I took us over the curb. Around the side of the roadblock. Startled looks from the pedestrians as they saw me muscle the huge black SUV onto the sidewalk.

I leaned into the curve, smacked my hand on the horn button in the center of the wheel. A dull pain worked its way up my forearm, but I ignored it and held the button down. The horn blared into the evening, echoing off the sides of the buildings over the roar of the engine.

Galen gripped the armrests of his seat.

“Dayna, are you sure that this is a good–”

“No, I’m not!”

People scattered out of the way as the SUV bore down the sidewalk. My palms turned wet with perspiration when an elderly couple barely made it inside a doorway as we went past. Too dangerous. A slower couple, or a jogger wearing headphones—I’d plow them into next week.

I did my best to aim for a clear spot I saw up ahead, to get back on the street. Just beyond a cluster of booths selling movie photos. Set of lampposts coming up on the other side, decked out with a hanging planter and shiny vinyl poster of Humphrey Bogart smoking his trademark cigarette.

I jerked the wheel to the side. Tight fit. Too tight for the extra-wide bulk of the SUV. Crash of splintering wood as the bumper on Galen’s side took a chunk out of the vendor’s booth.

The metal bar of the hanging planter scraped along the driver’s side. The rearmost window made a ‘pop’ and shattered. Shaw let out an outraged squawk.

“Shaw, you all right?”

“Trouble yourself not,” he replied.

I risked a quick glance over my shoulder as I got us back into the middle of the street. The griffin shook his head, shrugging off stray glass shards, and then stuck his head out the new opening. Wind ruffled his feathers as he looked into the direction of travel.

“Thy mode of travel suits me better now,” Shaw announced happily.

I swerved around another cluster of vendors, horn blaring. One more turn, skidding my way onto Hollywood Avenue. Giant batteries of klieg lights lit up the sides of buildings with floods of yellow and green.

Posters and advertisements touting classic and upcoming films hung from every lamp post down the way. They swung in the evening breeze like the snapping pennons of Benedict’s palace. People continued to scatter as the SUV barreled down the neon and klieg lit street.

I looked in the side mirror. I didn’t see Esteban’s car. But I did notice people doing a double-take as they spotted Shaw’s huge eagle’s head sticking out the window.

So much for keeping a low profile now.

We passed the vintage theatres on either side of the road. Up ahead on the right, I spotted the steep-sided roof shingles of Grauman’s. The curb had been blocked off by a line of orange traffic cones. Too bad for whoever wanted the spot, though.

I staked my claim by simply running over the cones with the bulk of the SUV. They made a series of sad-sounding little *thunks* as they went under the vehicle. The brakes protested with a grinding squeal as I brought us to a stop in front of Grauman’s.

The smell of popcorn and hot asphalt shoved its way into my consciousness as I shut off the motor. I pried my fingers from where they held the steering wheel in a death grip. Galen let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

“Mercifully, that is over and done with,” he said.

“That part is, yeah.”

“Do you not think this entrance is a little ‘public’ for our needs?”

“Not much choice.” I pointed at the building next to Grauman’s, a six-story brownstone trimmed with jade green glass. “Lobby entrance on the left side. We go in through there. Can you follow up on Liam’s tracing?”

He pulled out the medallion he’d taken back from Shaw. A dim blue glow shone from it.

“At this distance, there should not be a problem.”

“Good.” I spoke over my shoulder as I added, “Both of you, shield your eyes from the camera flashes. They’re harmless, but they’ll blind you.”

The coral-red columns of the theatre’s main pavilion, flanked by a pair of Chinese dog statues, sheltered a crowd of tourists to our front and right. The iconic cement flooring with the footprints of the stars had been holding everyone’s attention. At least until now.

Everyone looked excitedly in our direction as I slipped out of my seat. At least I could duck behind the SUV as I ran around to the rear hatch. Galen, on the passenger side, held up his forearm to protect his eyes. A veritable sea of flashbulbs winked on and off as he got out.

I keyed the rear hatch open and stood back. Shaw stepped out onto Hollywood boulevard, his fur and feathers slightly disheveled from the rough ride. He flexed his wings with a vast furling and unfurling, and then raised his proud eagle’s head like the majestic creature he was.

The crowd saw the griffin’s muscular lion’s body. The mighty paws with their sharp talons. The stern eagle eyes and the jackhammer-chisel of his black beak.

As one, they let out a scream.

That’s when they up and ran.

Towards us.

The crowd rushed forward towards us like the storm surge on a sandy beach. Galen and I came around to shield our companion from the onrush. For a split second, I caught the look in Shaw’s golden eagle eyes.

The battle-hardened griffin actually looked *afraid*.

People jostled and shoved each other to get photos or videos. Cameras, cell phones, electronic gadgets of every sort were held up, bathing the three of us in a shower of flashes and blinking LEDs. A jumble of sound engulfed me, from which I could only pick up a babble of voices.

"Griffins kick ass!"

"Who is it? Who's in the suit?"

"When's Griffins Galore 3 coming out?"

"You were *awesome* in the first two movies!"

"Take me away, I want to fly with you!"

My head spun as I realized that my little 'hide in plain sight' idea for Shaw had gotten a following. Some of the crowd pressed around our sides, stroking and petting Shaw's flanks. He scowled and opened his razor-sharp beak.

"Shaw," I warned, "no biting!"

The griffin grumbled something about feeling 'soiled', but he submitted to the patting and tugs at his fur.

I tried to shove my way through the throng. I made a couple steps headway, but the influx of people just made it too much. Frustrated, I turned to the Wizard.

"Can you get us through?"

Galen nodded and raised himself to his full height. He made a massive sweep with his arm. My eardrums throbbed as he bellowed in his deep centaur's baritone.

"*EVERYBODY MOVE!*"

And the crowd parted. I blinked. Well, I'd been expecting magic, but this worked too.

Shaw loped along between us as we ran through Grauman's courtyard. I heard Galen gasp as we got midway through the crowd. He held up the medallion, which blazed bright blue, then skidded to a stop.

"Dayna, the weapon's location has changed," Galen informed me.

He pointed at one of the windows on the fourth floor. I followed his gaze. Saw the ripple of a lacy white curtain in a double-sized French window. Crank-style panes, thrown wide open to the warm

summer night.

The metallic glint of a rifle barrel.

No time to freeze up now.

“Down!” I shouted, and I launched myself at Galen.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Galen let out a startled grunt as I hit him in the midsection like a tackler. I didn't take him down. His massive trunk just bent, shifted as he turned, half-caught me.

But it was enough.

"Dayna, what–"

The crack of a gunshot. Barely audible over the continued babble of the crowd. The uppermost button on Galen's sleeve snapped off with the clink of metal on metal.

Galen's sleeve burst open. Smell of burning cloth, burning hair. Revealed the bloody crease that the bullet had dug between the his wrist and elbow. He let out a gasp of pain and rage.

The percussive sound of a ricochet off the courtyard blocks.

Time slowed to a crawl. By some trick of the light, I saw the bell-shaped button flip end-over-end in a high arc. It landed on the concrete with a cheery jingle.

Shaw let out a lion's roar and launched himself into the air. Arrow-swift, it took only a pair of wing beats for him to reach the fourth floor. He dove beak-first through the open window.

The tinkle of breaking glass. Shattering wood. Sounds of ripping, tearing.

A second gunshot.

I heard Shaw scream in pain.

"Come on!"

Galen followed me out of the courtyard at a run. He let out a hiss as we shouldered our way through the lobby's glass doors. Held his right hand over the wound on his left forearm. A couple drops of crimson spattered on the marble.

"The wound stings," he said, as he caught my glance.

The lobby was dusty, deserted. The two elevators doors were marked out of order. Didn't think we had the time, to wait, anyway.

"Stairs," I said, with a toss of my head.

The baleful red and white light of an EXIT sign illuminated the stairwell. I took the stairs two at a time for the next couple of floors. A deep, percussive rumble. As I rounded one switchback, the building shook with an explosion.

I came within an inch of tripping on my face and knocking Galen down with me. I took the remaining flight without skipping steps, until I got to the main hallway door. Galen grasped my shoulder, held me back.

"No, Dayna," he said. "Let me go first."

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed through the door. Galen hadn't even broken a sweat on the way up. Damned centaur.

Gasping, I followed as best I could. Galen pounded down the length of the hallway. Came to a stop before one of the doors. He tried the knob, found it locked, and then kicked in the door.

I skidded on the slick marble of the hallway floor. Grabbed the broken wooden jamb of the door to steady myself. I went in on Galen's heels.

Blur of impressions now.

A single, cavernous room. Drab, eggshell-colored wallpaper, now spattered along one wall with an arterial red spray. Pieces of wooden furniture strewn about, smashed to kindling.

Shattered glass crunched underfoot. Shreds of ripped curtain lay in a tangle. My tongue curled in revulsion with the smell and taste of fresh blood, charred feathers, ghosted together with spicy tingles of cinnamon.

All we could see was the broad expanse of Shaw's muscular back. One wing hung low, bleeding and crumpled. The griffin reared, snarling like a jungle cat. My skin rippled as Shaw raked his talons against someone's armor.

Galen stood, legs braced shoulder's width apart, trying to find an opening. A third gunshot. The bullet whined harmlessly into the night air. Shaw's head dipped, shot out. A clacking, snapping sound.

The griffin raised up, triumphantly, the barrel of the gun held firmly in his beak. With a flick of his head, Shaw threw the rifle out the window.

I heard a man curse. Heard him speak a trio of ugly words. Something in the same tongue I'd heard Galen use against the dragons in the Fayleene Woods.

Blue lightning crackled and leaped to touch the tip of Shaw's beak.

An ear-splitting peal of thunder rattled the teeth in my jaw. The griffin flew across the room. Smashed into the opposite wall in a shower of talcum-white plaster.

Shaw's eyes closed in pain. He clenched one paw tightly in a fist. The other scrabbled against the hardwood floor for purchase.

The griffin tried to right himself, but it was too much. He sprawled out on his side, the broken wing pinned underneath. He let out a groan and lay still.

The cloud of plaster dust kicked up by Shaw's impact cleared with a breath of wind. A crunch of glass as the man turned to face the new threat. The folds of a dark cloak hung in tatters about him and he wore a bright silver breastplate, now scored from neck to belly with a triple set of talon marks.

The Duke's expression as he saw me looked haunted. And somehow relieved. As if a particularly loathsome card had finally been turned over, no longer needed to be hidden.

"We finally come to this," he said heavily. He raised his hands slowly to show that he held no weapon. But Galen remained at the ready, a flicker of magical fire held deep within his palm.

"It appears so," I said. My voice came out more bitter than I'd expected. Outside, the play of neon and searchlight made a crazy quilt-work of patterns on the walls around us. I still heard the crowd outside, perhaps the hint of a siren in the distance.

"It doesn't have to all end in fire," he said reasonably. "I have never met a woman like you, Dayna. One strong enough to stand by my side. Perhaps–"

"Save it," I retorted. "Even if I could forgive your murders, your attempts to kill me…I sure as hell won't date a man who goes around on all fours. And you do. Isn't that right, Magnus Killsheven?"

His handsome face froze. The breeze picked up again, jostling his

scalp lock. This time, the wind carried up the scent of caramel corn to mix with the iron tang of blood. Wonderful.

"So you know."

"I know enough. You can cross worlds and change your shape. You teleported into the Grove of the Willows, armed with rifle and staff. Murdered King Benedict and Duke Kajari. When the centaurs arrived, you shifted into Benedict's form, started the dispute that would put the realms on the path to war. After the centaurs left and before the Andeluvians arrived, you changed into Kajari's form so that you could teleport out and assume his identity. To make sure that Andeluvia prosecuted the conflict that you started."

Magnus inclined his head to me in salute.

"Very good. I should have tried harder to block the Albess' idea. To bring you to my world. You see, I of all people know how powerful your science is."

"How's that?"

"Because King Angbor ordered my execution," Magnus said, with a hateful glance at Galen. "He had me shot with arrows, then cast off a precipice into the mists below."

"Twenty years ago," I said, understanding. "That's when you must have come into my world. And shifted shape to pass as a human."

"Even so, I nearly died before someone brought me to one of your hospitals. I cheated death thanks to the magic of your surgeons and the sorcery of your antibiotics."

"Dayna, give me the word," Galen gritted. "I shall rend this traitor into a smoking pile of ash."

"If you were sure of your power, you'd have tried that already," Magnus said dismissively. "But there's two good reasons you won't be able to touch me."

"You're delusional," Galen scoffed.

"Wait a moment, Galen," I said. "Tell me, Magnus."

"Why do you think I came to this mechanical, sterile world of yours to begin with?" Magnus rubbed the side of his jaw, where Shaw had bruised him. "Benedict and Kajari wore medallions enchanted to resist all sorcery."

“You needed to back up your assassination plans with a rifle.”

“Precisely. Benedict went down with my first shot. The Duke gave me more trouble. A brave man, really. He charged right towards where the shot came. I had to kill him with both sword and firebolt.”

“And because of that, you think we can’t touch you?”

“In essence. You never found those anti-magic medallions. Guess who’s wearing them now?” Magnus smiled and patted his neck, where a pendant would have hung.

Would have. His hand encountered nothing. Magnus’ smile vanished.

A cough from off to one side. Shaw opened one swollen eye. The griffin unclenched his closed paw. A pair of medallions and their snapped chains lay tangled in his furry palm.

“Art thou searching for thy trinkets?”

Magnus shouted a single incantation. Like a striking snake, he flung his arm out towards Galen. Blue lightning sizzled through the air.

“Galen!” I cried.

Galen’s hand was already in motion. His own phrase was shorter, faster. Magnus’ bolt shattered into a rainbow of jagged sparks. Magnus jerked backwards with a startled gasp.

Before he could recover, Galen charged forward. He grabbed hold of Magnus, slammed him against the wall. Pinned him by neck and wrist. The two centaurs, both in human form, snarled at each other. Shaw got painfully to his feet and limped towards the pair.

Magnus ceased struggling and began to laugh. His voice sounded hoarse as he fought for air.

“This changes nothing. Nothing!”

“I’d say it changes a lot, Magnus,” I said.

“Not quite. Something very curious happened tonight. When I crossed over to your world, I didn’t come here first. I needed to ensure that you couldn’t return.”

“By murdering me. The way you did Good King Benedict.”

“Ideally, no. Only if it was needed. If I could kill your Wizard, you’d be stranded here. Long enough for me to complete my plans.”

“If you plan to appeal to my mercy,” Galen growled, “you are doing a particularly poor job of it.”

Magnus glared at his fellow centaur. “I tried to locate your home. It didn’t quite work. Your trace had faded by the time I could slip away from court. But I persevered. And find it I did.”

An awful, leaden feeling crept into the pit of my stomach.

“Imagine my surprise when I got to your house. I found you’d left already. But you left a little fayleene prince, all tucked in and asleep in your bed. Even better, you left a map with your destination marked on it. I took care of your fayleene, and used my magic to get here before you.”

Shaw let out a bone-chilling snarl. “If thou hast harmed him–”

“He is alive. For now. In a special, secure place. Trussed up like a coney for stew.” A snakelike, lipless smile crossed Magnus’ face. “But if I don’t return within the hour, the princeling runs out of air.”

“What do you want, Magnus?” I gritted.

“You’re going to let me go. I’ll put your fayleene somewhere safe. But in a place you can’t get to him. Not until the next morning has come and gone.”

“And you have the blood of thousands on your hands?”

He shrugged. “We spoke about that, Dayna. One must shatter a few eggs to scramble them.”

I stepped up to Galen’s side. My limbs felt leaden, cold. The sounds from outside died away, until all I could hear in my head was the beating of my heart.

My hand shook as I raised my arm. Placed it on Galen’s shoulder. My eyes lit on the half-clotted cut that Magnus’ bullet had carved below Galen’s elbow.

My voice sounded distant as I spoke. “Let him go, Galen.”

He didn’t move for a moment. I heard Shaw’s voice instead.

“I say nay, Dayna!”

“This is my world, and you’re going to follow my lead,” I said sternly. “Let Magnus go.”

Galen dropped his hands. Magnus rubbed his neck where Galen’s fingerprints had left angry red marks.

“You’ve won this round, Magnus,” I said sullenly.

“It is good that you acknowledge–”

I slapped him as hard as I could. His face jerked to one side. I locked my gaze on his ocean-blue eyes. Made sure he heard my next words.

“Only *this* round.”

Magnus drew himself up. All eyes followed him.

A chill wind whistled mournfully through the room as he left.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

The cold breeze blew the remaining plaster dust from the office. It also carried up the sounds from outside. The roar of the crowd hadn't stopped. If anything, they'd gotten more raucous.

Something occurred to me. Between Shaw's advertisement, our entrance in the courtyard, and the wizardly fireworks, everybody thought the battle had been staged for their amusement.

Hollywood. You had to love it.

Shaw sank to one knee, and then lay down gingerly. The feathers along the leading edge of his damaged wing rustled in the wind. Galen went to his bloodied side, began to probe his wounds. The griffin paid no attention to the Wizard's ministrations, even though they must have hurt.

"Defeat hath a bitter taste," Shaw murmured.

"We'll find another way," I said.

"How? Thy enemy leaves us in his wake, free to return and work mischief."

Galen spoke up, his voice soft but confident. "This contest is close-run, but it is not over. Magnus shall not be going anywhere for some time yet."

The obvious question formed on my lips. Galen removed a glass jar from a pocket and smeared a peppery-smelling jelly over Shaw's burns before continuing.

"Magnus was left vulnerable when Shaw took his anti-magic medallions. But I dared not burn him down until we knew what cards he had left to play."

"I saw you cast some kind of spell," I said, nodding. "It split Magnus' lightning bolt and knocked him back. But I didn't see any… well, any…"

"Any sizzle? Pyrotechnics? Not all spells are flashy. This one wasn't. But it is quite potent." Galen looked up and grinned. "It's a magic-blocking spell. I deprived him of his Archmage-level casting

abilities. He won't be able to teleport, or return to Andeluvia for at least twelve hours."

"Superb!" Shaw said, as I took Magnus' medallions from his paw. I tucked the golden pendants in a handy pocket. "Thou must return, tell all the truth! I shall remain to find our princeling."

Galen shook his head and moved on to examine Shaw's wing.

"Were it so easy. The spell that blocks a wizard's most powerful spells applies to the caster in equal measure. So we are stranded here, for now."

"That's just fine by me," I said firmly. "So long as I get a chance to bring this son-of-a-bitch down. But twelve hours puts us awfully close to the end of our three day deadline. We'll have to get moving–"

I paused as something I'd heard on one too many police investigations echoed in my ear. The unmistakable *click* of someone racking the slide of a semi-automatic pistol. Glass crunched under Alanzo Esteban's shoes as he entered the shattered room, gun drawn.

"My God," he breathed. "Dayna, you had better tell me what is going on, and quick-like."

I traded a look with Galen. No point in being subtle about it anymore.

"Fine. My companions here are from another world. One where magic works. I've been on a murder case for them, to find who killed their king, and we just missed capturing the killer."

"Okay. And?"

"And?" I faced him squarely. This evening hadn't exactly been going my way, and my fuse was getting very short. "For starters, you can put away the pistol before you accidently shoot any of my friends!"

Esteban blinked. He slowly holstered his pistol. The detective squinted in the ever-shifting spectrum of light that pulsed outside the window. Tried to make out who Galen was tending to.

"A pretty wild story there, Dayna. You expect me to believe in it?"

"I expect you to believe your own eyes," I replied, beckoning him to come closer. "You've met Galen before. He's actually a centaur. And a wizard."

"A centaur. And a wizard. Ah."

"And as you can see, he's tending to Shaw. Shaw's a griffin."

"No kidding?" Esteban knelt in front of Shaw, gave him a close look. "The entire department's been buzzing all day about how to get tickets to this new movie about griffins."

"Fancy that," I said wryly.

"Yeah, it's amazing what they can do with special effects these days." Esteban reached out and kindly patted Shaw on the top of his eagle head as if the griffin were an oversized Irish setter. "You look like ten miles of bad road, *amigo*."

Shaw scowled back.

"And thou art a fool and a fop!"

Esteban jumped back as if he'd been sitting on steel springs. He windmilled his arms for a moment to keep from falling over.

"Jesus Christ," he gulped. "You're real!"

Esteban's eyes zigged back and forth between the griffin and me. Galen chuckled as he watched the Homicide Detective struggle with accepting Shaw's words.

"As I once told Dayna," Galen said, "this is reality. One should accept it."

Esteban groped for words and came up empty. He shook his head like a dog doused with a tub full of cold water.

"Who the hell *are* you people?"

"I'll be happy to explain," I said, as I heard the distant wailing of sirens drawing closer. "But we need your help, Alanzo. If we don't get out of here before the rest of the LAPD arrives, then a war's going to break out. Thousands of people will die by tomorrow morning."

Esteban hesitated. I could practically hear the gears turning in his head as Galen finished putting a binding on Shaw's wing. Finally, Esteban ran his hand along the side of his stubbly jawline, as if he'd made a fateful decision.

"I still don't quite understand what's going on," he allowed. "But I can help you, Dayna…if you'll go out with me afterwards."

My jaw dropped.

"What?" I sputtered something incoherent for a moment, and then

said, “Fine! Of course! I’d have said ‘okay’ before, too. You didn’t have to wait for a moment like this.”

Esteban made a knowing, smug nod. “A simple ‘yes’ would have been enough.”

I threw my hands up in frustration as Esteban led the way out. The fate of a world at stake, and here he was, thinking with the little head. I swear, I will never understand men.

Together, Galen and I helped Shaw down the stairwell. Luckily, the worst wound came from the bullet that Magnus had put into the griffin’s wing. But Shaw’s bones must have been laced with steel. He’d come through a full wizard’s blast with no more than bruises, cuts, and a couple minor burns.

We emerged back into the courtyard at Grauman’s to a healthy round of applause from the crowd. A half-dozen police cars now ringed the entire building. Esteban stood talking animatedly to one of the patrolmen.

“I’m telling you, we had reports of gunfire,” the patrolman protested.

“You think tourists have anything but sawdust between their ears?” Esteban fired back, as he pointed up towards the fourth-story window. “Isn’t it obvious? The whole thing’s a publicity stunt for the third movie in that griffin thing.”

“But–”

“But nothing! Do you want to be the one to tell Bob McClatchy that you’ve left a dozen city blocks unmanned on a festival night? Just so you could come watch a live-action advertisement for a movie?”

“You’ve got a point there,” the officer said. He stared at Shaw as we went by. “Damn, those are some good effects. Much better than in the first two films. Where’s the zipper on the suit?”

“There’s no zipper,” I explained. “He’s entirely made up of computer graphics.”

One of the officers in the background nudged his friend with an elbow. “See? Told you.”

“Okay, people,” I said, clearing my throat. “We’ve got to get back to the studio. Let’s load up! Detective, you still giving us an escort?”

“Of course, of course,” Esteban replied, and he hurried to his cruiser. I got Shaw in the back of the SUV, closed the rear hatch, and got the motor running. I pulled away from the curb as soon as Galen slammed his door.

I drove us slowly through the crowded streets, working my way off Hollywood Boulevard proper. Esteban followed in our wake, hanging off our rear bumper.

“Doubtless that was the easy part,” Galen sighed. “But we have no way to track down our quarry. Only Liam’s magic could trace Magnus’ sorcery.”

“Truly, ’tis a rotten piece of luck to have lost him,” Shaw agreed.

The poor little prince had been dogged by bad luck since he’d arrived in my world. Whether luck was a magical power or a perspective, the way Thea had described it to Liam, there was no doubt that…

Wait a minute. Perspective. When what was bad really could be good.

It hit me like a thunderclap. As we exited the festival area, I pulled the SUV over to the side of the road. It was obvious. As effing plain as day!

“Dayna?” Galen asked, concerned.

“We’re going after Magnus,” I announced. “We’re getting Liam back.”

“Praytell, how?”

“Our friend Magnus just made his first big mistake. And we’re going to use it to nail him once and for all.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five

I moved the Ford Expedition up a few yards so that we had the additional glow of a street lamp to illuminate things. I'd pulled us over on a street that held little traffic and few pedestrians, so I didn't think anyone would bother us. I leaned across the passenger side to pop open the glove compartment. I pulled out a Los Angeles city map clipped with a ballpoint pen.

I got out of the SUV and unfolded the map against the warm metal skin of the vehicle. Galen followed suit, and then came around to my side, while Shaw simply poked his head out of the broken rear window. Esteban parked his unmarked cruiser and joined us, though a deep frown creased his forehead.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "Dayna, I thought you needed to get back to your house."

"Thou shouldst be silent, lest I clout thee," the griffin declared sternly.

"Leave him be, Shaw," I said. "Esteban, I didn't say I needed to get back home. We needed to get away from Grauman's so we could make our next move."

"To apprehend this murderer you're tracking," Esteban said.

"No. To get back a friend of ours he kidnapped. But if we find Prince Liam, we'll also find our killer. A wizard named Magnus."

"Your bad guy's holding a 'prince' hostage?"

I nodded. "Andeluvia—where my companions are from—is big on monarchies."

"This guy must have it in for the royal family, then. He kills Liam's father, then kidnaps the prince himself."

"Your facts are slightly off," Galen said wryly. "Magnus killed our Good King Benedict, to be sure, but Liam is hardly his heir. Prince Liam is a member of the fayleene people. Is that clear enough?"

"As mud. Thick mud."

"Benedict's human," I elaborated. "fayleene look like white-tailed

deer."

"Except that they have the power of speech," Galen added. "And, except for Prince Liam, they possess rather ungracious attitudes."

"But the way fayleene look is key," I said, as I pored over the map. "When Liam set out today to help us find Magnus, a ranger up in Griffith Park shot him with a tranquilizer gun. Then tagged him."

Esteban stared at me for a moment. "That's some seriously bad luck. For our relations with this other world's people, I mean."

"That's what I thought, Alanzo. Until I realized that Magnus made a big mistake. One which gives us the advantage. Like my friends here, he's just not that familiar with our world, our technology."

"Thou speakest fairly," Shaw agreed. "For I cannot divine the stroke of fortune in our favor."

"But I can," Esteban said, with a blink of realization. "Quick thinking there, Dayna."

"When our forest service 'tags' a deer," I explained, "they don't just put a piece of plastic in their ear. They also insert a tiny glass pellet containing a microchip transponder under the deer's skin. Magnus just kidnapped the one member of our team carrying a *tracker* inside of him."

At that, Galen grinned. Shaw made a soft, resonant chuckle. I turned everyone's attention back to the map by uncapping the pen. I drew a couple of wide arcs on the paper above the city's main grid of streets.

"Magnus said that he'd take Liam somewhere we couldn't get to him until tomorrow morning. I'm betting that he'll bring Liam north. Either up by Griffith Park, or somewhere into the hills above Hollywood."

"He could just as easily stash your 'deer' friend in East LA," Esteban countered. "Or go west, towards downtown Santa Monica."

"I don't think so. Magnus knows that I'm part of the LAPD. It's one of the reasons I was brought to Andeluvia. He knows that I'd have 'allies' available to search for Liam in the city. So he'll be looking for the shortest route out of it. The shortest route to somewhere he can stash Liam."

“How do we locate the princeling’s tracker?” Galen asked. “If it’s under his skin, I don’t understand how we can detect it.”

“It’s a passive radio-frequency tag,” Esteban said. “If one of the tag’s microchips passes within range of a detector, it lets out a little ‘ping’ on a tracking board. The big one the Parks Service uses is up by Laurel Canyon.”

I looked at Esteban with renewed interest. “I didn’t know you were familiar with this system.”

“Ah. Yeah, that’s an interesting story.” His swarthy face took on a reddish tinge. “My last girlfriend, she worked for Fish and Game. She pulled a lot of late shifts. Those tracking centers, they’re so lonely at night. And yet strangely beautiful, with all the city lights below. You should see it, Dayna. With me, of course.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Cut to the chase, Romeo.”

“I will, I will. The people at the Parks Service, they track wildlife all along the city fringe. They’re worried about cars and such hitting animals, so they put trackers by each underpass and paved intersection. To figure out migration routes, that sort of thing.”

“That would seem to work in our favor,” Galen noted. “If Magnus knows how to use one of your world’s vehicles.”

“I’m betting that he does,” I said. “Remember, Magnus has been to this world more than once. He’d quickly pick up on how useful a car would be.”

Esteban leaned over my shoulder. He traced his finger along a couple of major roads outlined on the map. Tapped two spots in emphasis. Abruptly, I became aware of Esteban’s closeness. His cologne smelled of sweet cedar and musk. I liked it.

“If he’s using a car,” he said, “then he’ll eventually have to come along one of two ways: by the Hollywood Reservoir, or the Sepulveda Pass.”

“I agree.”

“How fast can you three move, once I contact you?”

“As fast as I can drive this SUV. Galen can’t transport us via magic, and Shaw’s hurt.”

“Wounds matter not,” Shaw said. “My wings shall suffice for thy

cause."

"I know they would," I said. I stretched out a hand to rub the top of the griffin's polished black beak. "But you'll have trouble flying while it's still night."

"Okay," Esteban said. He sighed heavily before he went on. "You're still under house arrest, Dayna. So I'll go up to Laurel Canyon. Commandeer their tracking board for us."

"Does the LAPD have jurisdiction over the Department of Fish and Game?"

"Not really, no." He quirked a grin as he added, "But the park service people won't know that. Now, do you have any idea which chip frequency to look for?"

"I think so." I pulled the tag I'd clipped from Liam's ear out of my pocket and pointed to where the chip's bar code had been printed on the yellow plastic.

"Perfect, Dayna. The moment I hear anything, I'll call your cell."

I beamed at him. "Alanzo, I really do appreciate this."

He shrugged, and then added, a trifle shyly, "Come over to my car for a moment. I have something I think you'll be needing."

Puzzled, I folded up the map and handed it to Galen before following Esteban around to the rear of his patrol car. He popped the trunk, obscuring the view of the centaur and the griffin.

The mustiness of old cardboard and the sharp tang of fresh gun oil danced a two-step on my tongue. Esteban rummaged around, found a case that he'd stuffed into the trunk's webbed cargo net. He opened it and pulled out a shiny black shoulder holster.

The handle of a Glock stuck out with an evil looking bulge.

"Esteban, I'm not fond of guns. I've seen way too much of what they can do to people. And I don't like it."

"You're not leaving until you put this on. No matter your feelings, you should know how to use this. You've joined me at crime scenes, so I know that the LAPD had you qualified on nine-millimeter pistol."

His hazel eyes seemed at once worried, and yet firmly set in stone. The eyes of someone who wouldn't entertain argument.

I nodded agreement.

Damn him for remembering that set of regulations.

I took off my jacket and he helped slip the holster around my shoulder and torso. The gear clung to me like an alien, hateful thing, throwing off the scents of worn leather and nylon like a cheap Halloween outfit. I put my jacket back on and tugged it closed, hiding the gun's rig as best I could.

"Better," Esteban pronounced.

I let out a breath, tried to keep my voice even. "Are we done now, Detective?"

"Almost," he said seriously. "*Perdone*, Dayna. I am sorry, but I don't know your new friends. Not as you do. How much do you trust them?"

I didn't hesitate. "With my life, Esteban."

He paused for a moment. Esteban turned away and slammed the trunk shut.

"Then I hope they live up to your expectations."

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Chapter Thirty-Six

The dark streets remained empty, ominously quiet as I drove Galen and Shaw back to the house. Esteban parted ways with us at the freeway as he made a sharp U-turn to catch a different entrance ramp. A short while later, I pulled us into the garage and gratefully lowered the automatic door.

"Dayna, one moment," Galen said, as I got Shaw unloaded. The griffin got out slowly, careful not to jiggle his bandaged wing.

"What is it?"

"It would be best if I made sure that Magnus left us no nasty surprises."

Galen took a pinch of spice from one his pockets, and then spoke a single phrase, emphasizing it with a downward sweep of his arm.

"*Finns det nagon mitt hus!*"

The air vibrated in a silent ripple. For a moment, I swore that someone had swabbed my tongue with a leaf of chocolate mint. The sensation faded as Galen nodded to himself in the affirmative.

"It is safe," he pronounced.

We went inside. The back door hung pathetically by a single, broken hinge. A circlet of sooty burns marked where the knob had been. The map I'd marked with Grauman's theatre was missing.

My skin crawled as I went into my guest bedroom. But a flick of the light showed that nothing had been disturbed. Aside from the sheets I'd wrapped around Liam's body. I turned away with a shudder.

I overrode Galen's protests by cleaning and bandaging his arm wound. The Wizard had been right—it was little more than a bloody scratch—but it had needed tending. Next, I helped him put the broken door back into place. Finally, I made sure to grab my cell phone.

I turned the phone's ringer volume to high and plugged it into the recharging unit next to the kitchen sink. Outside, the world remained pitch black. It had grown late. Even the lights leading up to Griffith Park observatory had been doused. But I didn't realize how tired I

was, until I caught myself nodding off at the table.

Adrenaline had its limits.

"One must rest sometime," Shaw admonished, nudging me softly with his beak. "Do not trouble thyself, Dayna. The watch shall be kept."

"You're hurt," I protested feebly. "You need rest more than I do."

"Shaw's right," Galen said. "You and he need to sleep."

"Nay," the griffin said, addressing both of us. "Both of you shall retire from the field. I have stood many a watch in my time. I shall not shirk duty now."

Galen stretched his arms and let out a yawn.

"I would argue with you, Grimshaw. But I know griffins. Your code of honor forbids you to sleep when others need rest or replenishment. And honor counts for all with a griffin."

I grinned at that, for it sounded like what Shaw had told me, way back when I first met him.

Way back?

What, a day and a half ago?

I shook my head. I went to use the bathroom. Afterwards, I tried splashing water on my face, but even that didn't perk me up. I gave in and stumbled my way over to my bedroom.

I lay down and stretched out. Savored the coolness of the pillow beneath my head.

"Dayna," Galen said, gently shaking my shoulder. Reluctantly, I turned over and groaned in response. It sounded like someone was playing a song on a badly tuned music box in the background.

"Dammit," I grumped, "just let me sleep for a moment, Galen. Take the guest bed. Or the couch. Whichever one, I don't care."

"I appreciate the gesture," the Wizard said dryly. "But you've been asleep for some time now. And your 'phone' is playing music."

The little cellphone lay in Galen's palm. It cheerily belted out a tinny rendition of Bach's *Toccata in D*. I rubbed a stray grain of sleep sand from the corner of my eye as I grabbed the phone, more out of reflex than anything else.

Esteban didn't mince words. "He's moving, Dayna."

My drowsiness vanished. Those three words sent a shiver down my spine like a deftly struck tuning fork. I swung my legs off the bed and stood. Galen retreated a step and stood by the doorway. His face wore a mask of concern.

"Location. And direction."

"Two hits. First on Vista Terrace. Next on Runyon Canyon. So he's heading north into the Hollywood hills. Call you when I get the next hit."

"Gotcha. We're moving."

I untangled my jacket from where I'd crumpled it beneath me as I slept. Tucked the phone in a pocket. I caught the centaur's expression, which remained strangely crestfallen.

"What is it, Galen?"

Wordlessly, he gestured to one of the windows outside my room. I stepped to the doorway and gasped.

Sunlight streamed in through the living room windows.

"How long did I sleep, Galen? How long did we both sleep?"

"Long enough." He shook his head. "There was no reason for Shaw to wake us. None of us expected Magnus to simply cross his hooves until morning."

"But the time…is it…has the war begun?"

"Within the next hour, surely. Unless one side or the other was stirred to strike first."

The SUV's horn blared from the garage, making us jump.

Shaw's voice boomed out, calling to us impatiently. "Thou art a pair of sluggards!"

We hurried over. As Galen and I got in, Shaw withdrew his taloned paw from where he'd stamped on the horn button. He hunkered down in the rear compartment on his haunches looking battered, but strangely energized.

"You look awfully happy for someone who didn't get much rest," I said, as I triggered the door and backed the SUV out onto the road.

"Daybreak and battle approaches," Shaw explained. "Twould be wrong to miss our chance to die as heroes!"

That's a griffin for you. Always thinking constructively about

destruction.

The sun's burning orb hung a couple handspans above the horizon, blinding me with its glare in the rearview mirror. The air felt hot, humid. A rare combination in the dry climate of Los Angeles. Though the sky remained clear, the dampness made the day feel tenser. Expectant, the way the atmosphere felt before a cloudburst.

The phone rang again.

"Dayna," Esteban said, "another hit. Glen Oaks and La Cuesta."

I bore down on the gas pedal, boosting our speed over the limit. A quick glance in the rearview showed no cops, at least for now. I turned onto the main boulevard leading to the 101. But Esteban's latest report made me hesitate.

"Alanzo, those streets…that's almost up by the reservoir."

"You think he's heading up there to dump a body?"

A morbid thought, but understandable. We'd worked more than a couple gristly finds up that way.

"Don't think so." Actually, it was more that I 'hoped' it wasn't so. No time to dwell on that now. "My point is, he's moving really fast."

"Right. He hasn't turned off the main roads and he's almost out to the San Fernando Valley."

"Then he's still heading north."

"Looks like. Call you on the next hit."

Snap decision.

I cranked the wheel around to the right, earning a well-deserved honk and cussing out from the BMW that I cut off. Went through the yellow as I took us up the entry ramp of the freeway. Galen blinked, puzzled, as he saw the sign that labeled the ramp *SOUTHBOUND*.

"Dayna, did I not hear you say that our quarry lay to the north?"

"You did," I agreed.

"Then should we not…head the same direction?"

"Not necessarily. At least, not in Los Angeles."

The Wizard sighed and massaged his temples. "Your world never ceases to baffle me."

"Magnus is heading north at speed. But he's in the twisty part of the Hollywood hills. We take the freeway south to the next exit, it'll

take us to a straight, flat frontage road heading west and north."

"We take the long but fast way," Shaw nodded, understanding. "Move to thine enemy's flank."

"Got it in one." I got us off the freeway, caught the next light, and roared up the hillside frontage road.

The SUV's transmission squeaked in protest as we jounced over the badly kept pavement, but we kept speed. I had to pound the horn a few times, at first to get around slower moving cars. Then, as the city faded behind us and we got into the Hollywood ranch-and-mansion country, I used the horn to warn off the odd horse rider or group of cycling enthusiasts.

Another ring on the cell.

"He just passed through the Beverly Glen underpass."

Dammit. Magnus must've been flooring it. He'd gotten even further north than I'd gambled. I powered us around a grumbling pickup truck loaded with hay, and then my attention snapped back to what Esteban was saying.

"-police report from last night. A single auto theft was reported near Grauman's. A blue Tacoma pickup with a white camper shell. That's got to be what he's driving."

"Got it."

I bit my lip, made another turn up an even steeper slope to the west. I leaned on the gas harder, felt the SUV grunt and labor under the strain. Less than a quarter-mile between my car and Magnus' now.

"Passing Dorado and Hutton now. Dayna, you're cutting this close! If he gets north of Mulholland Drive–"

"I know, there's a dozen ways he could go!"

Major understatement by Dayna Chrissie. Once on Mulholland, Magnus had a warren of side-streets he could disappear down. He could vanish into the suburban sprawl of Sherman Oaks or Burbank. I hung up and stashed the phone within easy reach on the center console.

"That didn't sound encouraging," Galen observed.

Up ahead, the road made a graceful dip. Then it side-winded its way up the side of a canyon, up towards a veritable cliff. A narrow

strip of land, dotted with olive trees and tangled underbrush, ran along the ridge line at the top.

Shaw poked his head out between us again. His feathers rustled in the breeze from the dashboard vents. The griffin focused his golden eagle eyes as he focused on something above and ahead of us.

His beak clicked in agitation. “Couldst that be our quarry?”

I squinted up the slope. My eyes watered in the brilliant California sunshine. The image swam amidst tears, but I saw the blue and white Tacoma as it went by. A stray shaft of sunlight revealed Magnus’ shiny bald head and his dark scalp lock.

“Dammit! He’s gotten ahead of us!”

“Nay, that shall not do!” Shaw cried. “Release the hindmost door!”

I reached down, popped the SUV’s rear hatch.

The griffin leapt out the back as if shot from a cannon. He took three long, loping strides on the hot asphalt. Then launched himself into the air, unfurling his wings with a roar.

Shaw’s wounded wing stuttered, quivering, as he took off. He veered to one side as he fought to stay on course. The griffin banked, trying desperately to stay aloft. I watched helplessly as the bank turned into an uncontrolled roll.

Shaw disappeared into the trees that lined the steep slope of the cliff face.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Shaw plunged out of sight beyond the canyon rim. I searched the Expedition's rearview mirror desperately, hoping that he hadn't slammed into the canyon wall or its rocky floor. My skin broke into gooseflesh as I heard cracking branches and the scrape of flesh on rock.

"There, up ahead!" Galen cried. He jabbed his arm forward for emphasis.

The griffin emerged from amidst the underbrush that grew by the boulder-strewn base of the cliff. Leaves, twigs and bits of bark fell away from Shaw's underbelly as he soared upward along the sunbaked cliff face.

I couldn't exactly gun the motor on the twisty part. Thin metal guardrails were all that kept the huge Ford from going off the edge. Steering the SUV felt more like driving an extra-large waterbed. I gritted my teeth. Just another couple of hundred-degree turns, and we'd finally be on Magnus' street.

"What's he doing?" I asked, swerving around another hairpin turn.

"What would you expect of our resident happy warrior? It appears that he's trying to stop Magnus on his own."

I risked a glance away from the road. The griffin had shifted his glide pattern to get ahead of Magnus' vehicle as it drove past on the road overhead. Using both hands, I racked the steering wheel far right to make the turn onto the main road.

The tires made an unnerving rasp as the pair on the driver's side scratched for purchase on the edge of the dirt embankment. I snapped the steering wheel back around. And with that semi-smooth maneuver, Magnus's pickup truck appeared through the haze of road dust, not more than sixty yards distant.

A narrow strip of land dotted with scrub oak and olive-drab bushes ran along the left side of the road. To the right, there wasn't much between the vine-covered cliff face and the road. The best the

state of California could do was provide a gravel embankment and a series of foot-high metal stakes topped with amber-colored reflective markers.

Bellowing a roar that would've done credit to a dragon, Shaw popped up over the edge of the cliff. Hovered for the space of a single wingbeat in front of the blue pickup. The Tacoma's wheels vanished in a dun-colored cloud of dust as Magnus braked frantically.

Shaw dove forward. Talons out and stooped like a hawk diving for the kill. A skin-rippling sound as he raked the cabin roof. Then, with a hideous shriek of claw on metal, Shaw tore off the entire top half of the camper shell.

The road was just too narrow. I couldn't swerve to avoid the shell, so I simply ran over it. The crunch of metal and plastic came from below as we continued to gain on the pickup.

The griffin flipped himself around to face forward. Just as a blue flash of lightning came from inside the cabin. The bolt blew a fist-sized hole through the cabin roof.

Shaw let out a growl that belonged on the African savannah. He swung one mighty forepaw down. The driver's side window shattered.

The pickup swerved, jolting the griffin off. Shaw rolled, splaying his claws on the road to come to a stop. Magnus lost control of his vehicle as all four wheels spun on the dust-covered asphalt.

The Tacoma bounced to the left. Then went off the road and into a grove of valley oaks. With a *crunch*, the vehicle ran into one of the stout old trees. Glass shattered and metal creaked. Everything went silent save for steam jetting from a burst radiator.

I stopped the Expedition in its own cloud of lung-choking dust. Galen and I ran towards where Shaw slowly got to his feet. The griffin sported a few new bumps but didn't seem worse for the wear.

"You needed Magnus stopped," Shaw said matter-of-factly. "Thy foe hath been stopped."

"He hath indeed," I agreed. I nodded to the Wizard next. "We need to check out the vehicle. Galen, do you have enough magic to cover us?"

"Surely. If Magnus can still cast a firebolt, so can I."

Galen took up a position near our SUV. Together, Shaw and I walked towards the pickup. I reached inside my dust-stained jacket and pulled out the Glock. Flipped the safety off.

I went first. I knew how to use the gun, but had never fired it in anger. Part of me was worried that I'd accidentally shoot Shaw.

A three-foot thick valley oak seemed to grow from the bashed-in hood of the Tacoma. The driver's side door hung loose, window shattered. I stepped up, gun at the ready.

The cabin was empty.

"Nothing here," I said.

A creak as Shaw stepped on the truck's rear bumper. The sounds of rummaging. Shaw backed off a step, eyes narrow and suspicious.

"The scent of fayleene doth be clear enough. But where–"

Something tickled my nose. Too delicate, too buried by the swirl of dust, wood, and charred bark for most people. Sweet, rancid. Honey from a sick hive of bees. I knew what it was, had smelled it a few times before in the lab.

Gasoline. Specifically, gasoline that someone had pumped full of oxygen.

"*Get back!*" I cried to Shaw.

A single blue spark zig-zagged down from amongst the trees. Illuminated the face of a man hidden deep within the grove. The spark lit upon the Tacoma's silver-bright hood ornament.

The truck went up with a *WHUMP!* The flash of heat, the blossom of a fireball. And then everything. Went black. A wall of fur and feather smothered me. Knocked me backwards off my feet.

I rolled, came up on my belly. Shook my head, tried to get my bearings. Still had my gun in a death grip.

Sound of someone calling my name.

Sound of thunderclaps. Everything came to me in a kind of fog. As if my ears had been stuffed with cotton.

Shaw lay next to me on the sun-warmed asphalt. Motionless. Side blackened. Overpowering smell of burnt fur, burnt feather. Burnt flesh.

Finally, my brain wired the switchboard back together. I shook

myself, slapped one cheek to get moving.

"Dayna!" Galen dashed to my side, grabbed me by the back of my collar, and yanked me off the road. A bolt of blue slashed across my field of vision, just missing the two of us.

My voice came out in a dry croak. "Good save there, Galen."

"Simply returning the favor," he said, panting. "Can we call for assistance?"

I swore as I reached into the jacket pocket and came up empty. "Left the phone in the car."

"That would be problematic, then."

I looked over my shoulder. The Expedition sat where I'd pulled it over. A column of smoke puffed skyward from where it burned merrily.

"That son-of-a…" I said, as another firebolt whizzed by overhead.

I saw movement in the trees beyond. I aimed, squeezed off two shots. Heard the bullets whine off rocks.

And then Magnus' voice called out to us.

"I see that you survived, Dayna."

I clenched my jaw as I replied. "You haven't been helping."

"I should have done more. Hubris, that's been my big mistake."

I nodded at Galen. We moved a few yards to the left, towards some better cover. Rocks and weeds, mostly. But better than where I'd been sitting in a daze, out in the open. I winced as I saw that Shaw still lay sprawled across the road, limbs akimbo, not moving.

The sunlight dappled the shade in the grove beyond us. Where Magnus' voice came from. I thought I saw him, deep in the shadows. It looked like he'd swapped his mantle and robes out for a hiking pack.

I fired off another shot. Only heard the crack of a tree branch in return.

"Be careful, Dayna," Magnus said mockingly. "If you hit me, you may end up hitting your favorite princeling."

I cursed.

"I'm no marksman. If he's using Liam as a shield, there's a good chance I'll hit him as well as Magnus."

“My magic would be no less lethal,” Galen observed. “It appears that he has us checked.”

I pursed my lips. The smells of hot metal and burning oil filled the air. Overwhelmed my poor nose. Too much.

Or not enough.

It had been a hot summer. The gnarled, wizened grove of valley oaks had to be awfully dry.

“Galen,” I said, pointing at the cluster of oaks, “think you can burn Magnus out of there?”

The centaur’s smile was at once dazzling and chilly.

He moved to a crouch. He shifted his scale-leather satchel so that he could grab a pinch of gold dust from a pocket. Used it to trace a series of symbols in the dirt. Galen’s voice crackled with energy as he spoke.

“*Tá contúirt dóiteáin ann!*”

Forks of white-hot lightning arced between the branches of the valley oaks like something out of Victor Frankenstein’s laboratory. Everywhere a bolt touched, the wood splintered and burst into flame. Black smoke poured from the lichen-encrusted bark and bone-dry tree trunks.

Magnus howled. He stepped out of the clouds of smoke. His once-shiny bald head was crusted with a web of day-old and fresh cuts. The remnant of his scalp lock lay smoldering on his shoulder.

I raised my gun. Galen tensed. But we did nothing.

Magnus had Liam slung around his neck like a gunny sack.

Each pair of the little fayleene’s limbs were bound with so much rope that they looked as if Magnus had tried to mummify him. Liam’s hindquarters hung off one side, his head lolled limply on the other.

Magnus pressed a hunting knife to Liam’s neck.

“I should have realized,” Magnus said. He made a strange laugh, about two steps down from a giggle and devoid of anything sane. “Only you. Only a woman like you could take a trio of useless misfits and use them to cause me so much trouble.”

“It’s over,” I said, not lowering my gun. “Magnus, you can’t win this. All you can do is make everyone lose. Every single innocent

person in your world is going to war as we speak. For no good reason."

He shrugged. "I'd hardly call them innocent, Dayna. And I am going to win this one. Back off, or I'll cut the fayleene's throat."

I gritted my teeth, did my best to hold back tears. This man—this centaur—had been someone that I'd respected. That I'd sort of admired, sort of liked. And yes, in 'that' way.

Now, that same man was systematically hurting and killing the people around me. That same man didn't care one bit if thousands of lives were snuffed out. I never knew that I could be so effing blind.

"Where do you plan on going?" I shot back. "You plan on getting to Andeluvia on foot?"

Of course, right then, the universe has to bestow the *Dayna Chrissie Putting Her Foot in It Award*. It wasn't really what I said. More the timing of it.

A soundless ripple in the air. Like the one Galen had performed at my house, banishing all harmful magic. We rocked back on our heels, as if a strong breeze had pushed against us.

"My magic-blocking spell," Galen hissed. "It has ended."

Liam's eyes blinked open. Deftly, he grabbed the hunting knife's handle in his mouth, and tossed it away. Then he curled his long neck in a second time.

With a *crunch*, Liam bit his captor on the ear.

Magnus let out a scream. It echoed off the hills behind us. He placed his palms under Liam's body. Shoved up and out.

The fayleene gasped as he hit the ground. Rolled end over end. His smooth fur skidded over the slick gravel. Past the traffic reflectors that marked the drop.

Liam tumbled over the edge.

Magnus shouted a pair of nasty-sounding words and vanished in a brilliant white flash of light.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Liam! Liam!" I screamed, as I dashed towards the side of the road.

My voice collapsed into a whooping cough. I'd run through the great clouds of smoke that rose from the grove of valley oaks Galen had set aflame. My throat burned as if someone had tried to mesquite-grill it.

I knelt on the slippery gravel next to the cliff. Grasped one of the metal traffic reflector stakes set along the edge for purchase. I leaned out as far as I dared. Tangled brush and vine covered the sheer drop, giving way to jagged boulders far below.

I didn't see the smashed body of a deer.

I leaned out a little further. My shoulder joint made a warning creak as I put more weight on it. For a second, so quickly that I thought I imagined it, I saw a flash of movement.

From somewhere below on the face of the cliff.

"Liam!" I called again.

"I am here," his voice floated up.

My heart leapt. Liam was *alive*. I saw another flash of movement.

"Where? Can you climb up?"

"Not with my legs bound, no," he said. Mentally, I kicked myself for that one.

I kept seeing something move. Like it was slowly twisting in the wind from just below. But I didn't want to lean out any further. I wasn't sure the edge could hold my weight.

"I can't see you," I called to him. Galen appeared out of the smoke, did his best to look over the side with me. "Hold on, just hold on! We'll figure out a way to get to you."

"Not enough time," Liam replied. "My antler is caught in the brush. I can feel it slipping. Leave me, Dayna. There's no way out of this for me."

I let his words sink in. Made a fist. Pounded it on the gravel.

No. I wouldn't leave him.

"Galen, if Magnus could return to Andeluvia, that means you can, as well. You've got to cross back over, stop him from—"

"Not a chance," he retorted. "Remember, I am the one person that neither side will listen to. And I'll place my hand in a cauldron of hot pitch before I abandon anyone."

I gripped his arm tightly, almost painfully, in thanks.

"Can you…I don't know, levitate him out of there?"

"No such spell exists in my world," Galen said ruefully. He patted one of his many pockets. "But I do have a length of string. Properly enchanted, it should serve as a rope that can hold you."

"'Should' being the operative word?"

"I'm sorry, Dayna. I've not put this spell to the test before."

I swallowed, hard. Behind us, the fires from the pickup, the SUV, and the grove of trees burned with a chestnuts-roasting crackle. In the distance, I heard a helicopter approaching.

Nothing else, though. We were far up in the hills. It was anyone's guess when a real rescue team would show up.

"Then I guess it's time to test it," I said.

Galen held out an ordinary coil of horsehair string. He pressed it between his palms. To my eyes, in my fearful state of mind, it looked as if he were about to offer up a prayer.

"*Bättre kan star trep,*" he recited. The coil glowed a soft, mint green for a moment. "It is done, Dayna."

Working together, we tied it in a weave pattern along my waist and thighs, into a rappelling harness. Assuming it held, I'd at least have my arms free to grab Liam.

Assuming it held. My mouth went dry at that thought.

Galen backed ten feet away from the edge. He firmly planted his feet on the road asphalt and wrapped the string about both of his wrists. The hot wind from the fire tousled his dark, shaggy locks.

"Let us begin, Dayna."

I turned my back to the precipice. Skin crawling. The string in the palm of my hand felt insignificant, like a child's toy.

The sound of something slipping a notch came from below me.

Prince Liam emitted a gasp. No more time left. I leaned back, straddle-legged, and went over the edge.

The makeshift rope held. Galen payed the line out for me as I descended. Then I saw it. The cliff had a slight overhang. In that space, creosote bushes and tangles of western ivy grew in profusion.

Liam hung head up, neck canted painfully. His bound legs stuck out at odd angles, but his eyes remained calm and alert. As I watched, one of his antler nubs slipped free of one twist of ivy.

I swung down another two feet and over to him. I grasped his torso under his forelegs with both arms. Liam's breathing sounded harsh and fast in my ear. His breath carried the scent of fresh-cut grass and dark pine.

"I've got him! Galen, pull us up!"

I heard the centaur grunt as he engaged his muscles. We inched our way back up. It was all I could do to not rivet my eyes where the string rubbed against the raw gravel at the lip of the cliff.

And then we stopped. I heard Galen strain. But Liam's antler, which had been slipping free a moment ago, now refused to come loose from the tangle of vines.

"Dayna…" Galen gasped, "it feels like we're stuck. Can't…pull any harder."

I stuck one hand out, tried to reach the tangle at the end of Liam's antler. I could barely get two fingers over the closest snarl. No way out there.

"You've got to try!" I called up. "We've got no other choice!"

Suddenly, we moved sharply upwards with an extra-strong tug. Liam's antler tore free from the vines. Bits of leaf matter swirled in the wind as they drifted down.

One more mighty heave, and both Liam and myself were pulled back over the edge. I lay on my belly, gasping, coughing. Liam shook, his bonds still constricting his legs, and he gratefully pressed his cheek to the solid earth.

"You really found your second wind," I said to Galen. The centaur half crouched, half knelt on the road asphalt. Rivulets of sweat ran down his face. He shook his head.

“I had help.” He moved to one side.

Shaw opened his beak and let loose his grip on Galen’s belt. I let out a cry of joy as I saw him. The feathers along one side of his proud eagle face had been blackened, and his right eye had swollen shut. His wounded wing now lay folded by his side, streaked with red.

“No longer am I in battle prime,” Shaw said. “And my flying days are over, I think. But I may still serve thee as best I can.”

“That you have, Shaw,” I said, trying not to choke up.

I turned to Liam now. I couldn’t see where the ends of the knots were on his bonds. I tried to wedge my fingers into the tight coils of rope that bound the fayleene’s slender legs.

No luck.

Galen knelt at my side. He pulled out the same pair of cutters I’d used on Liam’s ear tag. I managed to work the blades into a spot where I could cut a length of the rope, not Liam’s skin.

The blades simply slid off the slick fibers.

I stared at the cutting tool, uncomprehending. Galen took it from me, tried the same thing. Once again, we didn’t so much as mar the rope’s fibrous twists of material.

Liam squirmed, and then finally spoke up, as cross as I’d ever heard him.

“Just leave me!” he cried. “More than my life is at stake here!”

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

The fayleene prince lay trussed up on the ground in front of us, thrashing futilely against his bonds. I did my best to calm him, but Liam wouldn't have it. His voice held an edge of despair and desperation.

"You must keep moving," he said. "You'll never catch Duke Kajari's impersonator in time if you don't go."

"Actually, 'Kajari' goes by the name of Magnus Killsheven," Galen said. "He has proven to be a rather disturbed centaur."

"Whoever he is, you need to leave!" insisted the princeling. "I'm… I'm of no use to you!"

"Look at me," I said, and I made sure that he was truly focused on me before I continued. "I need you to understand this, Prince Liam of the fayleene. I'm not going anywhere…without my good luck charm."

Liam blinked.

Twice. As if processing what I told him.

"Thank you, Dayna," he murmured. Liam lay back with a sigh, and no longer struggled.

My mind did its strange *clicking* thing again as I ran my fingers once more over the slick surface of Liam's bonds.

"Wait," I said, turning to Galen. "If you're able to enchant something like string, doesn't it stand to reason that Magnus might have the same skill with rope?"

"It does stand to reason," he mused, putting the cutters away. He placed a palm to each of Liam's bonds. "*Na téada!*"

The ropes went slack and slid off like a pair of gym socks. The fayleene stumbled to his feet with a triumphant cry.

"You did it!" Liam bowed to each of us in turn. "It appears that I owe my life to each of you."

"We may still owe the ending of this war to you, Liam," I replied. "Can you trace what you called 'the spoor of the spell' with Magnus, right now? So that we can come out where he did in Andeluvia?"

“That I can do,” he said confidently. “Just grant me a minute.”

Liam walked to where Magnus had vanished. The princeling lowered his head. Closed his eyes, concentrating. As he did so, I absently swiped at an itch on my cheek. My palm came away coated with smoky black specks. Great.

“Is this necessary?” Galen asked quietly. “I can return us to the palace without issue. Shouldn’t that be our destination?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “If the war’s about to start, no one’s going to be at court. And Magnus will want, above all else, to be there when the fighting starts.”

“I am forced to agree with you, Dayna.”

“While Liam works, is there anything you can do for Shaw?”

Galen nodded and moved to run his hands over the griffin’s bent and broken wing. It was Galen that winced, not Shaw, as the Wizard examined the griffin’s flanks.

Once again, Galen pulled out the gel he’d used in the apartment above Grauman’s courtyard. He emptied it out as he swabbed the worst of the burns. The tingling scent of pepper jelly coated the stench of the griffin’s singed fur and feathers.

“Shaw, I won’t mince words,” Galen said. “You will need more extensive care than I can give you here.”

The griffin shrugged noncommittally. As if he and the centaur were discussing the weather.

“I have been burned before, Wizard.”

“These wounds need treatment, and soon. Your eye and your wing, in particular.”

Shaw cocked his head so he could face Galen directly.

“Doth any of my wounds appear to be imminently mortal?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Then you shouldst worry not. I shan’t.”

“I have it,” Liam announced. “Magnus has crossed over to a vast grassy field. A quarter league to the east of the Grove of the Willows.”

“Then let us return with all speed,” Galen announced.

The Wizard’s voice rose to a crescendo as he spoke his magical incantation. The red glow of the fires, the blackness of the smoke, the

gold-green of the hills around us vanished.

Once again, we were plunged into an ocean of sparkling white foam. The smell of burnt plastic assaulted my nose, burned my tongue. My ears popped as if we'd changed altitude.

The dry grass crunched beneath me as I fell to my knees. My head spun, but I fought off the sick feeling this time. Shaw let out a painful groan as he got up.

I followed suit, checking the magazine of my gun as I did so. Empty. Of course. I stuck the Glock back in the shoulder holster. Maybe I could get close enough to Magnus to bean him with it.

Galen made a horsey, whinnying sigh. He gestured, and with a shimmer, changed back into his strapping centaur form. I couldn't help but smile as he practically pranced in place.

"You have no idea how good this feels," he said, shifting his weight back and forth onto each chestnut-colored leg.

The sun stood high in the morning sky. In the same spot that it occupied in my world. But here, instead of sheer drops and rolling hills, we stood on a tall-grass prairie plain, one that sloped up gently towards the east.

Downslope, the plain gave way to dotted copses of trees. Then the dark rim of a forest on the horizon. In the middle distance, I could make out the gray-green leaves of the Grove of the Willows.

Liam craned his neck above the chest-high grass. He squinted in the direction of the sacred grove, and then nervously pawed at the ground.

"There is movement within and around that piece of forest," the fayleene said. "A great deal of it, as a matter of fact."

On cue, a triple-noted blast of a hunting horn rippled up the slope. The distant sound of clinking, the tramp of many booted feet. The predatory cries of griffins echoed for a moment, and then I saw them.

The scarlet and black banners of the Andeluvian army emerged from the grove and took up position in front of it. I spotted armored knights on foot, most every man I'd met at the Andeluvian court, and a contingent of over a hundred fully armed and armored griffin mounts.

“Vazura’s Air Cavalry is out in full force today,” I observed.

“That is not all,” Galen replied. He pointed upslope, to where a massive dust cloud boiled into the sky.

Now I heard it. The jingle of the centaur’s chain mail and the clatter of their armor. The ground rumbled as their hoof beats shook the plain. I made out what looked like, at first, to be a gleaming forest of leafless silver trunks.

A second later, I realized I was looking at a hedgehog’s row of brightly polished lance points. The centaurs had come in full force, just as King Angbor had promised.

And of course, we were stuck smack in the middle of both forces.

“Where is Magnus?” I asked, as the thunder of the approaching centaurs rose in volume.

“Down there!” Liam said. “He’s almost to the Andeluvian lines.”

Sure enough, I spotted Magnus—still in his guise as Kajari—moving at a quick jog downslope towards the kingdom’s front line.

“What are thy orders, Dayna?” Shaw said, canting his head so that he could focus on me with his remaining eye.

I put my hands on my hips, considering. Given how fast the centaurs were moving downslope, I didn’t think we had time to do more than get to one of the two armies.

Which one to speak to?

Which one?

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Chapter Forty

I stood frozen in the golden expanse of waist-high grass. For one strange moment, I felt like I was the centerpiece of a colossal balancing scale. That either way I turned, the balance pans would tip and come down on one side or the other.

To the west, the vast plain sloped up to the approaching cavalry horde of King Angbor's centaur lancers. The ground thundered beneath thousands of hooves. My ear picked up the approaching jingle of the mailed horsemen.

To the east, the ground shifted from straw gold to the shimmering green of forest. The mass of soldiers in red and black uniforms made the ground look as if it were bleeding. Battle cries from the griffins cut through the air like knives.

Magnus, still in his human guise as Duke Kajari, continued moving downslope. If I rode Galen, we could beat him to Andeluvian front lines. And then we'd have to get the nobles to believe us before Kajari simply pulled rank.

Talking to the centaurs didn't seem much better. The only person anyone on that side knew about was Galen—the disgraced son of the King. But then again, Angbor, for all his bluster, had listened to me.

This couldn't wait any longer. I wasn't just a crime scene analyst anymore. If I'd learned anything at all over these last couple of days, it was to step up to the plate. To make the call and see it through.

So I made my decision.

"Galen," I said, "Can you give me a lift? We need to talk to your sire, and right away."

"I was quite afraid you were going to say that," Galen said. He adjusted the small leather satchel that carried his magical books so that it wouldn't cut into me, and then reached down to help me up onto his broad back.

I grabbed his waist as we moved almost instantly into a gallop. Shaw and Liam loped alongside, looking at turns worried and grim.

We didn't have far to travel. The centaurs were advancing at a steady pace, the equivalent of a moderately quick march to my eyes.

But a pair of centaurs broke away from the main body and galloped downslope to meet us. As the two came to a stop in a crunch of dry grass and a small cloud of dust, I realized that I recognized both of them.

I spotted out Angbor's massive chestnut frame and plaited locks from some ways off. Flanking his left was a stallion with hair the color of a match head and the markings of a pinto. This stallion had spoken up in Angbor's defense two days ago, when we'd had our little confrontation in the Grove of the Willows.

Judging by the frills and gold trim on his mail, I guessed that the redhead was serving as Angbor's second in command. He held aloft a blue banner crossed with a pair of silver swords.

"Well, Sturmgalen, you have returned!" Angbor boomed. He eyed me and Galen's other companions with an air of disdain. "And in strange company."

"I have indeed returned, father," Galen said, with a little bow.

"I had all but left hope for you behind, boy. Like a steaming corpse in my wake. But perhaps I am wrong." He gestured expansively, nodding at his companion. "Sir Jorvath, could I be wrong?"

"If you say so, dread liege," the pinto-colored centaur said respectfully.

"So, warm the blood that flows through your father's heart. Tell me that you're here to take up lances with us. To take part! To help me exterminate Benedict's troublesome kingdom."

"To take part?" Galen said, amazed. "In this…madness? Truly, your wits have flown. I am here to warn you of the trap before us!

Angbor frowned. It felt like a thundercloud had moved in front of the sun.

"Trap? My scouts have been all over this field. There is no trap set before us. This battle's victory will be ours for the taking!"

Galen turned his head and whispered to me. "Best that you dismount, Dayna. In case this gets unseemly."

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” I replied. I slipped off and gave Galen some room. Liam and Shaw moved up on either side of me, eyes intent on the scene.

“He doesn’t mean the battle, Angbor,” I said, raising my voice. “This war itself! You and the Andeluvians have been fooled. Benedict’s murder–”

“You try my patience, human,” Angbor said bluntly. “Honor must be satisfied, by victory or death.”

“You aren’t taking us to war to avenge a wrong!” Galen insisted, “You’re been manipulated by the thing you hate the most: a centaur wizard!”

Angbor stiffened as if someone had hit him with an electric cattle prod.

“Dread liege,” I said, deciding that it wouldn’t hurt if I used an honorific that Angbor liked, “I completed my investigation. Your enemy took the form of Benedict, and now wears the face of Duke Kajari. He is Magnus Killsheven, the centaur you condemned to death twenty years ago.”

Sir Jorvath let out a gasp. But Angbor digested my little revelation without expression. He threw his head back with a boisterous belly-laugh.

“I thank you, Lady Dayna Chrissie, for my morning’s amusement. It is good to know that when I cut off the Duke’s head, I will also be slicing the flesh of a pretender to my crown.”

My jaw dropped. “But…you’re innocent, Angbor! You don’t need to do any of this!”

“Need?” Angbor’s voice went up a notch. “The day is much too far gone to back down from battle! See where my warriors have lined up, hungry for battle? If we have all been deceived, only the splash of blood can wash away the stain of these lies.”

“Father!” Galen trotted forward, beseeching. “The day is never too late! You cannot create peace with a swing of your sword arm!”

“Oh?” Angbor trotted forward as well, face-to-face with his son. With one deft movement, he plucked Galen’s satchel from where it hung on its strap and held it up in his son’s face. “What would you

use, then? This?"

The Wizard's cheeks turned beet red.

"Answer me, boy. What would you use?" Angbor said again.

Now Galen's face shifted to purple. His fists clenched. Knuckles bulging.

"These moldy scraps of parchment? They're as useless as you are."

Galen seized his satchel back.

"I'd use whatever came to hand," Galen said, and his voice dipped low. "Whatever a centaur with a shred of intellect would do. Unlike you."

"Still your tongue, Sturmgalen!" Angbor's plaits fairly shook with fury as he got in Galen's face, berating him. "I know *three* ways to remove it with my knife. *Two* ways to tan it so I can hang it on a strap 'round my neck!"

"I know *one* way to still yours," Galen shot back.

He drew his arm back. Still holding satchel in hand, Galen drove his fist into Angbor's face. A *snap* of bone as the King's nose shattered. A *plink* of iron as the metal latch on the satchel broke.

Angbor wobbled to one side, his four sturdy equine legs turned to rubber, and then tumbled into the grass. His hooves quivered once and then lay still.

Sir Jorvath gaped at Galen's expression of coiled, controlled fury.

"You…you have felled Angbor," he stammered. "Who shall lead us, when we are about to plunge into battle?"

"Who do you think, Jorvath?" Galen demanded. "By right of combat, I claim the title of dread liege from my father! And my first order is telling our warriors to stand down."

"But we're already in battle line, lances drawn."

"Do not question me, Jorvath!" Galen's eyes burned like a pair of hot coals. Jorvath flinched away from them. "We are going to tell each and every warrior here: *Set lance to ground!*"

"But–"

"I am not only Angbor's son. I am also a Wizard. Do not make me use my sorcery to turn you into a toad." Sir Jorvath turned a little pale at that. Galen next addressed me. "Dayna, you must finish this without

my participation."

"What?" I blinked. "Why?"

"Because the rest of the centaurs aren't blind. The front ranks have seen me assume the kingship," Galen said. "What conclusion would they jump to if I galloped off to talk to the Andeluvians?"

Next to me, Liam let out a little snort. "Nothing good, that is for sure."

"Correct. Now, you have one big advantage if you confront Magnus right away: his magic has been drained in crossing back to this world."

"Doesn't mean he's defenseless," I replied.

"Definitely not. He may have enough for a minor spell or two, but no more. He won't be able to teleport, that much is certain."

Galen let out a breath. He looked down, saw with a flash of surprise and shame that he still gripped the crumpled remains of his book satchel in his reddened, blood-stained fist.

"Dayna, please understand the trust I am putting in you," he said. For a moment, the hardness in his eyes faded. All I saw were the tangled dark locks and handsome face of the first centaur I'd ever met.

"If I stand my people down and they are attacked, it will seem like treachery. On my part, and on the humans' as well. We'll never be able to repair relations between the realms."

"I won't let you down," I said, around the lump in my throat.

He nodded, and then galloped off towards the line of Angbor's—now Galen's—approaching army. Jorvath hesitated. He looked over at me anxiously.

"What the dread liege spoke of…" he said, with a quaver in his voice, "would he really turn me into a toad?"

I quirked a grin at the red-headed centaur.

"Put it this way," I said wryly. "How's your taste for flies?"

Sir Jorvath took off in the Wizard's wake like I'd lit his tail on fire.

Liam chuckled. "I do not ever want either you or Galen angry at me."

I went to where Skallgrym Angbor of the House of Friesain lay in a chestnut-colored heap in the tall grass. Shaw stood over him, one

paw pressed to the centaur's flank. The griffin nodded and looked up at me.

"Angbor hath suffered no great injury," he pronounced. "Save perhaps to his looks. Which to my eyes were of no great loss to begin with."

"Are you sure?"

Even though Angbor had been asking for it, I was concerned. Galen had decked his father hard enough to knock him out with a single blow. And Shaw wasn't exactly a graduate of med school.

"His nose is rent asunder, but his breath and heart doth remain steadfast and true."

That was going to have to be good enough. I didn't have time to do a full examination. Too much was going on, and the stakes kept getting higher. I only hoped the odds weren't getting any worse.

"Dayna," Shaw added, "Though I cannot take to the sky, I can still run, after a fashion. Come, we must overtake Magnus, ere he spreads his poisons further."

"I think it's too late for that," Liam said, as the fayleene's keen eyes peered downslope. "Look what is taking place."

I squinted at the tableau in the distance. Magnus had reached the Andeluvian army. Even at this long range, I could see him gesturing wildly in the direction of the approaching centaurs.

A ripple of silver as the front ranks of men drew their swords. And then, at the very edge of my hearing, I could make out cheers. Approving roars from the griffin mounts. The sound of steel blades pulled free from scabbards.

The sound of men getting charged up for battle.

So much for the odds not getting any worse.

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Chapter Forty-One

I felt my heart sink with a sickening sensation of dread.

Far down on the slope below us, the Andeluvians continued their damned cheering. Then they slowly began filing into ranks. Getting ready to advance on the centaurs.

Spearmen with large oval shields made up the bulk of the front line. One whole wing of the army consisted of squadrons of heavy cavalry. Their red and black pennants snapped smartly in the breeze. On the other wing stood a huge flock of griffins, their riders, armor, and harnesses decked out in a brilliant rainbow of colors.

A small cluster of men stood a dozen yards ahead of the main line. Magnus, still exploiting his position as Duke Kajari, conferred with Lord Behnaz and a mixed score of knights and nobles. To one side, Captain Vazura sat astride a new griffin: a gigantic, platinum-furred beast with wings the color of candle flames.

I didn't like the look of any of this.

"If we're going down there, it's now or not at all," I said.

I reached out and placed my palm on the griffin's shoulder. While clotted in spots with soot and dried blood, the dark gold and gray fur still felt kitten soft. I clambered aboard Shaw's back, leaned forward, and grasped handfuls of unmarked fur and feather as best I could.

Shaw took off with a jolt as soon as he felt me grab hold. I squeezed the griffin's flanks between my legs, but there was no need to worry. Though he moved swiftly downslope at a lumbering pace, the movement translated into a gentle, rocking ride. Liam bounded alongside, easily keeping pace with us.

"Out of curiosity," the fayleene prince called to us, "Do we actually have anything resembling a plan?"

"What need have we of a plan?" Shaw said, with a gleeful voice. "We arrive, we smash the traitor's deception. Either we triumph, or we perish by blade, bow, and talon."

"You know something?" I pointed out, "You don't have to sound

quite so pleased about this, Shaw."

"Thou hast fulfilled my fondest hopes, Dayna!" Shaw said, as his breath echoed in my ears like a great pair of bellows, "Do you not recall my words to thee, upon our first meeting?"

"Um…that I did you right, by allowing you to serve."

"True. I then said, 'tis not death in battle, but it would do." The griffin let out what sounded like a purr, of all the damned things. "Who could know that I really *would* get to die in battle whilst serving thee!"

And you know what? Of all the ridiculous things, I understood, even just a little, why Shaw felt so excited. I'd never given thought to how I would die. Odds were that it could've been some run-on-the-mill car accident in Los Angeles. But never, in my wildest dreams, did I think I'd meet my end atop the back of a charging griffin.

So I let out a wild laugh. What the hell, it was appropriate. The Last Charge of Dayna's Light Brigade.

"Well, I for one am glad you two find this so amusing," Liam said, with a wry tone. "I can see formations of archers in the rear ranks. Do you think they'll try to get a volley off before we get too close?"

"Doubt it," I said. "Magnus would like that, but too many people know that we've been on the trail of Benedict's murderer. It would look awfully suspicious if he ordered his archers to open fire on us as we ride up."

"Thy guess is about to be tested," Shaw put in, as the slope leveled out beneath us. "We are now crossing their best field of fire."

I held my breath as we continued to lope through the swards of tall, gold-tinted grass. Smells of ripening wheat and rich, loamy soil. I squinted skywards, my skin goose-pimpled at the thought of a sky darkened by a swarm of arrows.

But nothing happened. We emerged from the target zone unscathed.

Shaw's lope shifted to a walk as we drew near. Finally, he came to a halt just a few yards from the cluster of men that stood before the ranks of the vast Andeluvian host. I dismounted and stepped forward.

Magnus stood out in front. His clothes hung loosely about his

frame, wrinkled and singed, as if he'd slept too close to a campfire. By contrast, the armor of his companions gleamed with coats of fresh polish. Lord Behnaz sat on a dapple-gray horse, watching everything with beady, bloodshot eyes. Among the crowd behind Behnaz were knights and nobles I recognized from the palace.

Some were clad in mail. Others in plated armor draped with their fine palace doublets. I spotted the blue robe of the seer hidden amongst the mass of scarlet and black. And in the center of the crowd stood the page that had tended to both Duke Kajari and Shaw. The boy held aloft a T-shaped wooden standard. A banner with an ebony comet on a red field hung below the crosspiece.

"Ah, you have seen fit to join us, Lady Chrissie," Magnus' voice boomed. "I have already told everyone here how your return journey took you through a storm of eldritch magic. How it's driven you and your companions insane."

"Insane?" I sputtered, "The only one here who should be in a white coat is you."

"You see?" Magnus made a show of laughing at my protest. His brows knitted together in a frown. "Commander Yervan of the Palace Guard will take you into custody. For your own safety."

A well-built man wearing gold-trimmed plate armor stepped forward, followed by four other knights. With the slithery sound of steel on leather, the five drew their swords. Yervan hesitated as Shaw lowered his head with a serpentine hiss. Wounded or not, the griffin meant to fight.

Magnus watched the standoff with a mirthless smile.

"Commander," he said firmly, "I charge you as ranking officer of the guard, to remove this madwoman and her companions from my sight. Whether alive or not."

Yervan gripped the hilt of his sword. Jaw clenched, he prepared to give the order to advance. At that moment, Prince Liam stepped between us and Yervan's men.

"Hold!" Liam cried. "Do you recognize what I am?"

Yervan spoke up. "You are a fayleene, lest my eyes deceive me."

"Correct." Liam turned to scowl at his former captor. Magnus'

earlobe hung red and swollen where the princeling had bitten him. “We fayleene are beings of fey magic. Few know that we are immune to eldritch sorcery. Lady Chrissie is no more insane than I."

Yervan hesitated. His sword point dipped.

A good time to put the last cards on the table.

“Hear me, good nobles!” I cried. “You’ve been deceived!”

Magnus shouted back, trying to drown me out. “Behnaz, Vazura! Shut this woman up! Upon pain of death!”

“Oh, please,” Behnaz sighed, with an air of disdain. Vazura remained silent, motionless atop his mount, and simply crossed his arms.

Magnus let out a roar of frustration. He threw back his tattered cloak. Brought his hand up. His words cut through the air as he stabbed a finger at me.

I didn’t freeze, thank God. My feet did move.

But he was quick. So damned quick.

I didn’t even kid myself into thinking he was going to miss.

“*Hóski, seydir!*”

Cyan lightning ran down his arm. It leapt from the tip of his finger and towards my chest.

The thud of a pair of hooves. Liam’s form flashed before me.

The bolt struck Liam squarely. I couldn’t see the fayleene’s eyes, but his one complete antler lit up with the neon blue glow of a Las Vegas billboard. Sapphire sparks sputtered from the stub of the broken antler.

He shook his head and the remnants of Magnus’ bolt vanished with a *pop*.

Shaw gasped. I breathed Liam’s name, but the little fayleene didn’t hear. He bunched his haunches and shot forward as if launched by catapult.

Liam butted Magnus squarely in the chest. The centaur wizard barely had time to cry out as the fayleene bowled him over. Magnus landed on his back.

The princeling jammed one razor-sharp forehoof under Magnus’ chin.

“Few know,” Liam said, in a voice that was chilling to hear from a deer’s muzzle, “That we fayleene are also immune to the energies of a firebolt.”

Magnus’ face contorted with anger. “Behnaz! Vazura! I am your ruler! You will obey me and–”

“Quiet.” Liam leaned his weight on the edge of his hoof. Pressed it up against Magnus’ throat. Magnus went silent, though his face turned purple with rage. “Continue, Dayna. Finish it.”

“This man,” I proclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at where Magnus lay prone, “This man is not Duke Kajari! Kajari lies dead on a table in my world. King Benedict lies dead on one here. And this man —this centaur—is responsible for their deaths!”

I took a huge gulp of air to finish. My voice rang across the hillock, out to where I could see the soldiers in the front line leaning on their shields, listening intently.

“Centaur Wizard Magnus Killsheven! I charge you with the murder of the Good King Benedict!”

Silence. For a moment, I’d have sworn that I could hear a cricket chirp in the stillness. A breeze tousled the nearby grass with a restless rustle. Yervan’s jaw, which had been firmly clenched a moment earlier, hung slack.

Then I heard something that I didn’t expect.

Laughter.

Captain Vazura and Lord Behnaz openly laughed at my announcement. Great gusts of laughter, the kind reserved for punchline that they’d kept in for the final curtain call. Behnaz stifled his laughter by loudly clearing his throat.

“So, ‘Lady’ Chrissie. You claim that Duke Kajari…is in reality the centaur wizard, Magnus Killsheven.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Really,” Behnaz said, in his dark, oily voice. “Next time, tell us something that we didn’t already know.”

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Chapter Forty-Two

It figures.

I'd finally revealed Benedict's murderer to the world. Case closed, right? Not for Dayna Chrissie. Just when I thought I finally had a handle on the situation, everything went straight to hell.

Lord Behnaz looked at me with an air of disdain and pity. Perched on his mount above us all, Vazura smirked like an unrepentant street punk caught breaking into a church. I steadied myself as best I could.

At least Magnus also looked surprised.

"You…already know?" I said, barely keeping my voice below a feminine squeak. "But how? And when you knew, why didn't you–"

"Come, now. Did it ever cross that little mind of yours that Captain Vazura and I would find the circumstances of Benedict's murder…odd?" Behnaz rolled his eyes in Magnus' direction. "And this one…let's just say his acting skills aren't up to par. Not when you're familiar with every single mannerism of our damned king's favorite lackey."

One of the palace guards let out a gasp. Behnaz jutted his jaw out insolently and kept on speaking. He didn't speak as loudly as I had, but his voice carried at least as far as the group of nobles on the rise.

"Yes, you heard me right. I'm glad King Benedict is gone. We all are! Which is why I will be the one to lead us into Andeluvia's glorious future!"

Most of the nobles in the crowd let out a cheer. A few scowled, but did not speak out. The royal page's face went ash white. The T-shaped standard wavered as he looked around, unbelieving.

Yervan and the palace guards looked aghast. "My Lord…you cannot just assume command of this host!"

"Oh, but I can. Under Andeluvian law, in the absence of the royal family, a senior Lord may lead the realm's army into battle."

Commander Yervan glared for a moment, but then shook his head in shame.

“You have the law of the land behind you, if not the right, Lord Behnaz.”

“That will suffice for now,” Behnaz gloated. “And your insolence has been noted, Commander.”

Behnaz addressed the audience of nobles surrounding him.

“For too long, we’ve been living a sham, a lie. That we must… consort with those half-animal things when we should be ruling them!” He raised one gauntleted hand. With a metallic creak, he folded his fingers into a fist. “We shall conquer the Centaur Realm, take their riches for our own!”

A roar of approval came back in answer.

“First line infantry, prepare to advance!” Behnaz bellowed. “Archers, stand ready!”

Vazura held a little bronze cylinder to his eye. He aimed it upslope, twisting a knob on the side as he did so. He let out a satisfied grunt.

“No movement from the centaurs.”

“Excellent,” Behnaz said gleefully, “Our first volley should scythe through them like a field of ripe wheat!”

Numbly, I stared as long-necked trumpets blatted out a triple series of notes, conveying the order down the line. Up and down the line, units hoisted flags of red and black. The sound of waves on a rocky beach as the infantry began to beat their shields with the flat of their swords. Behind them, archers in bright red and white uniforms nocked wickedly sharp arrows to bowstrings.

“Whatever you felt about Benedict, listen to me!” I said, almost pleading. “There’s no need to go to battle with the centaurs!”

“You’re wrong about that,” Behnaz said. His eyes flared like molten steel in a furnace. “My warriors need this battle. I need it. You were just too slow to realize this simple fact.”

“Indeed,” Vazura added from above, with a coarse laugh. “That’s how a woman’s mind operates, does it not? About two steps behind a man’s?”

“Yes, it was certainly her bad luck,” Behnaz said, taunting me. “Bad luck to have no real allies in this world. Bad luck to have been

born female. She can't even restore her honor by doing something useful: dying on the field."

I closed my eyes at that. Held back tears of despair. I clenched my fists, as if that pathetic act would blot out the impending disaster. I'd done everything right. Every single damned thing! I'd solved the murder!

But still, these people wanted their damned war. Their senseless slaughter of Angbor's people. And my friend, Galen.

That's when it happened.

My mind went *click*.

So hard, that I felt my molars grind against each other. The numbing fog that hovered over my brain vanished in a wash of memories.

Liam's voice sounded, quiet and gentle, in my ear: *Luck isn't a power. It's a 'perspective'. The only true waste would be to despair. To give in.*

Galen's gentle admonishment: *Honor counts for all with a griffin.*

And then Magnus Killsheven's deep, rich baritone: *Why risk a kingdom that's about to plunge into war? A war where we'd be badly outmatched, if not for the griffins.*

That was it. And Momma Chrissie didn't raise her girls to quit before all was said and done.

I took a deep breath. Spoke as loudly as I could. So I could be heard over the rising din of men preparing for battle.

"You speak of luck, Lord Behnaz?" I said, deliberately throwing a mocking tone into my voice. "It is lucky that the realm of Andeluvia is allied with the mighty griffins, is it not? Because they're the only thing that allows you to challenge the centaurs. It makes me wonder: how badly overmatched would you be if they were not your allies?"

"Dayna," Shaw said quietly, out of the side of his beak, "What art thou up to?"

"Using the truth as a cudgel," I replied. I glanced over at Vazura's mount. "Who's the griffin with Captain Vazura?"

"Thou espies Firewing, the current Pride Leader."

"I have no need of your meddlesome speech, woman!" Behnaz

said.

"Who said I was speaking to you?" I shot back. "I'm addressing the Pride Leader of the griffins, not some overweight courtier with delusions of grandeur."

At that, Firewing raised his head. His bright golden irises, shot through with specks the precise color of ripe orange rind, focused on me with imperious curiosity. He said nothing, but I had his attention.

"I hear tell that honor counts for all with a griffin," I began. "But that must be a legend. Something from days past. If someone says that honor means something to a griffin, then they're a liar!"

Firewing blinked as if I'd slapped him. He let out a derisive snort.

"Why do I think that? Because you're serving Lord Behnaz. And Behnaz is leading you right into a war he knows was started by a wizard's lie. A deception. Any order he gives you, any order you follow—dishonors you and your entire people!"

"Fly, damn you!" Vazura shouted, as he thumped his heels against his mount's sides. "Do not speak with her, stupid creature! I forbid it!"

As if brushing off a pesky fly, Firewing reached back with one forepaw and grasped his rider's leg. The griffin made a forward-throwing motion with his forepaw. Vazura flew out of the saddle and landed on his face with a metallic *crunch*. The Captain let out a groan and lay still.

"Thy methods make an old drake proud," Shaw observed.

"Flattery doth not suit thee, Grimshaw," Firewing replied, in a voice both sibilant and deadly. The larger griffin's eyes swiveled back to me like lit search lamps. "My people are allied to Andeluvia. A dishonorable cause can still be served honorably. Or doth thou challenge my code? Speak quickly, ere I dip my beak in thy blood."

"You seek to serve honorably?" I asked. "Then tell me, Firewing: how much honor is there in attacking a foe which sits and does not fight back?"

"There is naught," the griffin admitted.

"Cast your eagle eyes upslope, then. Tell me what you see."

Firewing heaved himself to stand on his hind paws. Seeing the huge griffin do that was like watching a freshly scrubbed battleship

tilt on its stern. I didn't dare turn to look at what Firewing saw. With any luck, he'd spy a forest of lances quivering in the soft ground, point first. Where Galen had ordered his people to set their arms.

Of course, if Galen hadn't been able to control his father's warriors, then even my latest effort would be moot. And I'd just be caught in the undertow of this world's madness.

"Commander Yervan!" Behnaz shouted, his voice rising to a fever pitch. "I am ordering you, take that woman into custody!"

The leader of the palace guards looked over to where I stood. Shaw's battered, bloody face loomed over my shoulder.

Commander Yervan turned the point of his sword down. With a quick motion, he jammed the weapon into the soft earth. He stepped back and shook his head back and forth. Next to him, the rest of the palace guards repeated Yervan's action.

Sweat beaded Lord Behnaz's forehead as he saw his palace guard back off. He gasped for air like a drowning man as he realized what I was doing.

Panicking, he fumbled for a medallion that hung on a little silver chain around his neck and spoke into it.

"First Horse Cavalry, to me, now!" he shouted. "Cut down the woman and the griffin beside her!"

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Chapter Forty-Three

A terrible, pile-driver of a jingle rippled through the ground. An entire squadron of mounted knights on horseback came pounding down the length of the field. Instead of lances, each warrior reached back and pulled out a long sword, Wicked-looking red runes glinted from each weapons' blade.

Shaw let out a snarl. It was echoed and deepened as Firewing's massive vocal cords chimed in.

"The woman speaks the truth." Firewing declared. The huge griffin sank back to all fours. Casting a gimlet eye on the approaching horsemen, he let out a call that was half leonine roar, half eagle's scream.

Chaos broke out as the griffins that made up the army's left threw off their riders. The snap of leather harnesses echoed across the field as the griffins leapt into the air as a group, arrowing towards us.

The Andeluvian cavalry picked up speed. Their battle cries echoed in my ears. A flash of silver and black as they raised their weapons, preparing for the killer blow.

Lord Behnaz pulled his sword. He jammed his stirrups into his horse's flanks. Joined in the charge, screaming at the top of his lungs.

The griffins flared their wings. Landed around us to each side. Raised up, extending their deadly talons. All together, they let out a roar.

I'd never heard anything like it. Like a rippling, popping lava flow. A crackling inferno of redwoods. A steam cauldron with a thousand nozzles.

I tasted the smell of griffins' breath.

Hot copper and torn flesh.

The horses reared, throwing the charge into disarray. One rider went down, almost trampled in the fray. Behnaz shouted orders, managed to restore some kind of formation. He raised his weapon again, flanked on either side by his well-trained, mounted warriors.

Firewing's terrifying visage glowered down at Behnaz's mount. The horse's knees betrayed a slight tremble. And on either side, the Pride Leader's griffins arched their proud necks, ready to strike.

I stood my ground. Fixed Lord Behnaz in my gaze.

"Guess what?" I said. "*Mine are bigger than yours.*"

"Drop thy weapons," Shaw demanded.

Behnaz's knuckles went white on the hilt of his sword. His brow twitched, trying to figure out some other strategy. None existed.

He threw his weapon down in disgust.

"Stand down," he called. "Pass the order to the rest of our host! The battle is over, stand down!"

The next few seconds were filled with the clatter of steel and wood as swords, flails, and bows were put down. And as soon as the cacophony died away, Commander Yervan and one of his palace guards stepped up and grabbed hold of the reins for Behnaz's mount.

"What are you doing?" Lord Behnaz demanded, "Release me!"

"No one shall take orders from you," Yervan said firmly. "As leader of the palace guard, you are under arrest for usurping royal authority. The dungeon will be your next residence. But at least you can share that with your Captain."

"You cannot arrest me! By law, I am the legitimate ruler!"

"In the absence of the royal family, a senior Lord may lead the realm's army into battle." Yervan recited. "Unfortunately, Lord Behnaz, you just declared the battle over."

Yervan's subordinate led Behnaz off the field. The nobleman cursed and swore the entire way. Two more of Yervan's men followed, lugging Captain Vazura's limp form between them. The commander of the royal guards looked up at me, eyebrows raised.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," he said. "But who leads us in the absence of Benedict's son?"

A shadow flitted by overhead. I looked up, squinted against the bright sunlight. As if from out of a dream, an owl the color of a fresh Dreamsicle soared across the field to perch atop the Andeluvian standard. Cheers broke out as the assembled troops recognized Albess Thea.

“There’s your answer,” I said. “Want to bet that your country’s laws say that *outside* of battle, the leader of the realm is the reigning Albess?”

“One would advise against taking that bet,” Thea called out. “A foolhardy choice of financial acumen that would be.”

A clatter from off to my left. I whirled and saw Liam fall back into the grass. The fayleene called out in alarm.

“He’s free! Watch out!”

Magnus had shoved the princeling away. He rolled and came up with one of the dropped swords in his hand. He spoke a single word of magic. A shimmer rippled the air. In Duke Kajari’s place stood a handsome centaur stallion.

Magnus’ face looked like Kajari’s—wider, more angular, but similar all the same. Patches of brown, red, and white dotted his equine flanks. His pearl-gray hooves churned up dust as he galloped towards me, weapon aimed point-first at me like a dagger.

“You shall join me in death!” he cried. “Damn you, Dayna!”

He never got to carry out his threat.

A bright yellow flash came from the Andeluvian lines, scorching my retinas with a web of red pinpricks. Magnus stiffened as if he’d trotted across a live power line.

“No,” he groaned. “Not that…”

And with that, he slumped to the ground in a tangle of equine legs.

Master Seer Zenos pushed his way through the startled crowd, brandishing his stunning staff. He held the weapon up in front of me while Yervan sent two of his men to pick up the centaur. At this rate, Andeluvia was going to have to add a whole new wing of cells to the palace dungeon.

“Did I not say that my Staff of Stunning could grant oblivion for the rest of the day?” he declared with a wild cackle.

I nodded in the affirmative.

“Did I not predict strife in your future? Treachery? Treason? Blades, beaks, and talons?

I nodded again.

“And did I not see the bars of the palace dungeon at the end of your journey?”

I nodded a third time.

“You know something, Master Seer?” I asked.

“Yes?”

I patted him on the shoulder.

“You’re okay with me.”

The old soothsayer’s mouth shut with a snap. He looked thoughtful for a moment, processing what was probably the first kind thing anyone had said to him in years. Zenos’ expression softened. He bared his yellowing teeth in a broad smile.

I returned that smile, with interest.

Ask anyone who knows me.

I don’t need a Staff of Stunning to knock someone for a loop.

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Chapter Forty-Four

Two days after Thea pulled the army back across the Andeluvian border, Benedict's son Fitzwilliam finally arrived at the palace. I didn't get a chance to meet him. Instead, I was serving my time under house arrest, courtesy of Bob McClatchy.

But the day after my probation hearing, I came home to find a large parchment satchel sitting on my dining room table. It turned out to be a summons for the coronation of Fitzwilliam, he of the line of the 'Good and Noble Benedict'. And it came complete with a rather nifty looking pair of gold medallions. One to be used as an RSVP. The other would serve to teleport me directly to the palace on the evening of the ceremony.

I sent back my reply with a gift I'd purchased specifically for Liam.

A few days later, when I crossed back over, I was much better dressed for the occasion. I cut a good figure in an aquamarine-colored evening gown, one with the right shade to set off my eyes.

Benedict's son certainly didn't complain. He certainly gave my curves the royal once-over, and then some. The new king shared his father's noble, sad countenance, though the shoulder-length hair that framed the younger man's face was bright gold instead of wintery silver.

"I hereby pledge my life to uphold the laws of the realm," Fitzwilliam recited, before the assembled humans, griffins, and centaurs in the palace's great hall. "May fate smile upon my reign, and the reign of all in my line of noble blood."

The pronouncement made, Albess Thea swooped down from the hall rafters, the golden circlet of Andeluvia's crown grasped tightly in her talons. She placed the crown atop Fitzwilliam's head to the sounds of raucous cheering and applause.

I joined in too, clapping wildly. Tears brimmed at the corner of my eyes as Fitzwilliam bowed, and then exited the great hall to a

final, brassy flourish of trumpets.

The court's musicians started up, choosing to play a lively tune on what sounded like a quartet of flutes, a pair of tambour drums, and a flatulent alphorn. Though the pitch of the music seemed questionable to me, several of the nobles took to the vacant stage and began a courtly dance.

The vast wooden tables in the hall were cleared to make way for the coronation's massive first course. Servants put out huge silver platters piled high with carved roast meats, fresh fruit, tureens of stew, and elegant looking rounds of pastry.

I didn't see anything resembling mouse tart, but I wasn't about to push my luck. And I hadn't come for the food, in any case. From the moment of my arrival, aside from Benedict himself, I'd been surrounded by a bevy of fawning courtiers and minor nobles.

What I really wanted was to find my friends.

Royal guards threw the high, narrow arched doors open to let the assembly spill out into the green, grassy expanse of the courtyard. The weather had turned warm and humid, but unsettled. The sun played hide-and-seek between passing rain showers. Red and blue canopies dotted the spaces between the hall and the palace's outer wall, providing shelter from the occasional drizzle.

It was under one of these swathes of canvas that I spotted a bright gleam from halfway across the courtyard. I worked my way between clusters of chatting humans and centaurs, or the occasional stern form of a griffin. As I drew closer, I made out Shaw's noble profile and Liam's slender deer form.

"Dayna!" Shaw said, shuffling to his feet. "'Tis so good to see thee. My heart has been rent asunder by thy absence."

"That goes just as strongly for me, Dayna," Liam said in agreement. I knelt, stroked the little fayleene's side, and then elicited a purr from Shaw as I scratched his forehead.

"I missed both of you," I said honestly. "More than you could know."

My finger traced the line of bandages that ran along one of Shaw's brows. The swelling had gone down enough for the griffin to see

again, but many places on his flank and neck had lost patches of fur or feather. A wide arc of plaster encased the bones of one wing, immobilizing it.

"I see where thy gaze goes," Shaw rumbled. "Hardly pleasant, but soon, I shall fly again. In the meantime, I shall bear my wounds without notice."

"Don't let him fool you," Liam chimed in. "He's been scratching and picking at the bindings like a young chick in molt."

Shaw scowled. "Dost thou wish to end up on a griffin's dinner platter, princeling?"

"Now, now," I said reproachfully, "I thought we were beyond that."

"As always, I jest," Shaw declared. "I would never harm my friend."

"That's good to know," Liam said.

"It is the truth." Shaw nudged Liam's flank with his beak. "See, Dayna? At most, he is but one-fourth of a meal. And all that bone one must gnaw through–"

That made me bust out in a laugh. It felt good. I raised a hand to indicate the gleaming gem I'd seen from across the way. It had come from a diamond stud earring I'd purchased for Liam. Said earring nestled securely in the piercing the Department of Fish & Game had bestowed upon the fayleene prince.

"I'm glad you liked my gift," I said. "Your wound was the only one I didn't think anybody knew how to heal. So, I thought you might want to turn it into a…well, what my world calls a 'fashion statement'."

"What a marvelous turn of phrase!" Liam said. "I will say that it has attracted the attention of many a doe. Which is quite flattering, as far as it goes."

I sensed a slight hesitation in the prince's voice. I gave him a questioning look. He nodded at me, pawed the ground once, and went on.

"It is strange. I have never been truly welcomed in the fayleene herd before. Now, the does who shunned me raise their tails enticingly

when I walk by. I feel torn in two about it."

"Thou shouldst never feel mixed at the prospect of an eagless who wishes to make chicks with thee," Shaw said, though in a gentle tone.

"With me? Or with the 'hero' that I have become?" Liam shook his head. "Even given all the dangers faced, I've never been happier than in our group. The only group who accepted me…before. Does that not sound odd?"

"Mayhap it does. But, who knows the ways of a doe?"

"Who indeed?" I agreed, as I spotted a familiar silhouette perched high above, on the palace's battlement. "Forgive me, but I think I see someone else I must talk to."

Liam and Shaw bade me go, with a promise that I'd return once the second course of food had been served. I carefully picked my way up the rain-slick stone steps until I arrived on the upper level. On one side, the land fell away from the palace in the broad sweep of the valley.

The other faced inwards, towards the busy courtyard. Thea's vast claws grasped one of the stone pillars that jutted out of the battlement. She watched the revelers below intently, only swiveling her head in my direction with a soft 'hoo!' as I took a seat next to her.

"I wondered how long it would be before you joined me," Thea said warmly. "Doubtless you have many questions."

"Only one," I replied. "I figured that you knew who killed Benedict and Kajari. But…how?"

The Albess made her owlish equivalent of a chuckle. "Blind chance and illness, my dear child. These things do happen, you know."

"I am familiar with them," I said, straight-faced.

"I take it that you noticed the owl rookeries, located far outside the walls of this palace?"

I nodded in agreement. I thought back to the first ride I'd taken out to the Grove of the Willows. I'd spotted an enormous tree house, perched high in the branches off to one side of the road. "The Legislature" was all that Duke Kajari—Magnus—had said about it.

"We Parliamentarians prefer to roost in many wild places. To

balance out the hours spent hunched over ink and vellum. Thus, it came to be that I had found shelter and sleep in the dark nook of a tree. A willow tree, to be exact."

"You were at the Grove of the Willows on the day of the murders," I breathed. "But…that happened during daylight hours. When you were sleeping, right?"

"No, my dear. In my age, I find it hard to fly straight, to stretch my talons, to pass my water. And aside from these…" Thea looked owlishly embarrassed as she added, "Aside from these ailments…I have *insomnia*."

I paused, considering. Thea meant it when she spoke of chance and illness. Magnus had executed a near-perfect murder. And had been foiled, when all was said and done, by an insomniac owl.

"On that note, I must leave you be," the Albess declared. "Others with a need for privacy seek you out even now."

And with that, Thea launched herself into the air. A couple of fluttering, ragged wingbeats later, she soared off and over the side of the outer wall. I got up and brushed the dust from my gown as I heard the familiar clatter of equine hooves.

The sound resolved itself into a centaur, but not the one I expected. Skallgrym Angbor of the House of Friesain appeared at the top of the steps. His stern face bore the raccoon-like pattern of two black eyes, and his nose had been taped to a short wooden brace to help it heal straight.

"You are alone, Dayna Chrissie," Angbor observed, in his gruff voice. "That is good. There is something I must do."

And with that, Angbor brought his rough, calloused hands together as if in prayer. He recited a short verse of what sounded like poetry under his breath. And then he bowed low, so low that the long brown and gray plaits of his beard dangled dangerously close to the floor.

"Angbor, I don't…" I began, "Is this one of your customs? I don't recall Galen telling me about it, I'm sorry."

"Sturmgalen would not have told you, since he has never seen it," Angbor said as he completed his bow and looked at me in complete

and utter seriousness. “I have just made an oath of gratitude to you. Should you ever need help from my realm, you only need speak. Even if someday in the future, I am no longer King of the centaurs, this oath shall be honored.”

“It is I who should be honored,” I said, before I did a double-take. “Wait. Even if you are ‘no longer King’? Does that mean you are…”

“I am King again, yes,” he said, a trifle grumpily. “That son of mine has well and truly avenged himself upon me. Not only did he defeat me to gain the title of dread liege, he decided to humiliate me further. By giving me back the title without letting me challenge him for it!”

“I guess that’s what Galen thinks of as ‘tough love’, Angbor,” I said, trying to be sympathetic.

“Perhaps it is. And perhaps, someday, I will understand where I went wrong in raising him. To give him that streak of viciousness!”

I rolled my eyes at that, but I let it pass. “Regardless, I am grateful for your oath. There was no need to thank me for proving your innocence.”

At that, the centaur king let out a fiery snort. “You really do not understand my kind, do you, Dayna Chrissie?”

“What do you mean?”

“I could care less whether a bunch of gormless Andeluvian noblemen thought I was guilty or not!”

But Angbor’s expression softened, even under the shiny mask of bruises and cuts. He reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder. His palm radiated warmth, just like his son, Galen. He continued, this time in a voice so soft that I had to strain to hear the words.

“Dayna, I am thanking you for bringing the one who killed the Good King to justice. Despite all that has gone on between human and centaur, I counted Benedict…as my friend.”

A second set of hooves clattered on the steps. Galen appeared at the entryway of the battlement’s stone path. He made a short bow to Angbor as he spotted the two of us.

“Sire,” he intoned.

“Sturmgalen,” his father replied. “My business here is concluded.

You will join us for the evening's boar hunt, will you not?"

"Of course, father. I've had a special lance made for the occasion."

"So long as you haven't enchanted the damned thing. Say, to spear vegetables instead of meat for the table."

Angbor gave Galen a friendly cuff to the flank as he went by and slowly picked his way back down to the courtyard. The Wizard watched Angbor depart, a bemused expression on his face.

"Just when I thought I had puzzled out my sire," Galen observed, scratching his head. "He continues to develop new behaviors to baffle and astound me."

"It's called 'fatherly pride'," I observed. "And while I'm not your father, I think I know a little how he feels."

And with that, I went up on tip-toe and hugged Galen as hard as I could. My cheek brushed the soft folds of his jacket. The scent of a dozen spices wafted from his pockets, woodsy and exotic. The Wizard bent slightly and leaned into me, returning my hug. It was more than just an embrace between a woman and a centaur.

It was a silent affirmation. We did it, we survived, we *triumphed!*

"You know, I am curious about something," I said, once I'd finally let Galen go. "Did you give Angbor the kingship back because you didn't want the position? Or because you really did want to teach your sire a lesson?"

Galen looked at me. "I had an even better reason."

"Oh?"

"Do you not recall what Master Seer Zenos once told me? He said I would ascend to the centaur throne…but that I would only hold it for a few days."

My jaw dropped. Indeed, that was exactly what Galen had described to me, after we'd brushed the Master Seer off to head for the Fayleene Woods.

"Consider that to date, every single one of Zenos' prophecies have been correct." Galen said, with an air of mock seriousness. "Also, consider the man's advanced age! Were I not to ensure that his track record remained perfect, who knows what the poor man might do?"

"Why, one could but wonder," I replied, also with mock

seriousness. “Drop dead of apoplexy, maybe?”

That did it. We cracked up, badly. I even got a small case of the hiccups before all was said and done. Galen gave me a drink of water from a pocket flask and had me sit on one of the stones along the outer edge of the battlement until the hiccups subsided.

“Dayna, I need to thank you for all that has taken place,” Galen said, as the breeze tousled his long, wavy hair.

“I keep hearing that from people,” I sighed. “A lot of it was just me trying to keep from getting killed.”

“True, true. But I’m talking about what you taught me. About dealing with my father.” He pursed his lips for a moment, and then went on. “You were right. Even though I broke his nose, even though I ‘humiliated’ him by giving the kingship back…for a moment there, I behaved in just the way he’d always wanted. In a very strange way, he’s treasuring that right now.”

I chewed on that for a little bit as well. Amazing, what a well-placed right hook could do for family harmony.

“Speaking of dealing with difficult people,” Galen continued, “did you manage to settle your differences with Esteban and McClatchy?”

I chuckled. “Esteban and I have our first date this Saturday. He’s been sending me little ‘keep your chin up!’ cards so that I wouldn’t get depressed over McClatchy’s board hearing.”

“What came of that ‘hearing’?”

“I’m on ‘probation’. McClatchy can’t fire me, at least for now. And truth be told, that didn’t bother me so much. It was all the footage of you, me, and Shaw down at Grauman’s. And let’s not forget that little shoot-em-up in the Hollywood hills. I reported that someone had stolen the SUV out of my garage. The gang-crimes division of the LAPD thinks it was used in a hit that went bad. But even so, my friend’s SUV has been well and truly totaled.”

“Ouch,” Galen said, wincing. “I’m not sure what can be done there.”

“Ah, but that’s where some of Liam’s fayleene luck must have rubbed off. I got a call from the head of a major studio. She demanded to know which of her competitors had financed ‘Griffin’s Galore 3’,

and how we did the special effects."

"Praytell, what did you inform her?"

"The truth, sort of. I told her that I wasn't with a major studio, and that the 'special effects' were proprietary. Trade secret." I spread my hands. "Since I refused to budge, she offered me a nice fat check if I could convince my backers to hold off on releasing our film for one year."

"And you decided to abscond with the money?"

"Elementary, my dear centaur. I'm still going to have to explain the loss of the SUV, but at least I have the funds to replace it."

We were quiet for a moment. The smell of rain grew stronger as a couple clouds blew across the sun's face. Finally, Galen broke the silence.

"Dayna, I came to converse with you for one other reason. King Fitzwilliam wants to offer you a position. As Andeluvia's official Court Forensics Examiner."

"Really?" I said, startled.

"I daresay that it would be the perfect job for you. And speaking personally, I'd like it very much…if you'd consider staying."

I crossed my arms. Let out a breath and looked at the expanse of wet flagstone at my feet. Galen shifted uncomfortably from one hoof to the other.

"You don't have to answer right away," he cautioned. "But what do you think of the idea?"

"I think…" I paused, and looked him squarely in the eyes. "That I'm flattered. And I'm going to consider it. Very seriously."

Galen put his hand out to me in his now-familiar gesture. I felt the warmth of his palm on my shoulder. The Wizard looked relieved, lighter somehow.

"Good. I will tell the king, then. And hope that you decide in our favor."

The sound of hooves on stone echoed along the battlement, and then faded away as Galen departed. I looked out over the expansive sweep of the emerald green valley below. The sun came out from behind one of the clouds, lighting up the landscape with a glorious

golden glow.

A cry from far overhead. I craned my neck, made out a flight of young griffins as they rode one of the warm, moist thermals.

It made me consider everything that could lay ahead.

I still had a career to go back to in Los Angeles. A brand new guy in my life there. One who was going to be taking me out for the first time.

Here, in a brand new world, one where griffins soared the skies and centaurs worked magic, I'd been offered a job. A good one, too.

And most importantly, I'd found a trio of true friends.

So many wonderful things I had to choose from, for once in my life.

Just my rotten luck, I guess.

Try as I might, I couldn't keep the grin from my face. I turned away from the view and carefully descended the battlement steps, returning to the joyous crowd below.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *Centaur of the Crime*, the first book in the 'Fantasy & Forensics' series. I've always been a big fan of 'portal' fantasies, where the protagonist(s) have to balance lives in two worlds. It's something the Pevensie children had to deal with in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as the protagonists in Piers Anthony's *Apprentice Adept Series* or Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*.

Next up, let's see how Dayna fares in a bonus novella that takes place between *Centaur of the Crime* and the next book, *The Deer Prince's Murder*.

Michael Angel

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BONUS NOVELLA: FORENSICS AND DRAGON FIRE

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Chapter One

A world of griffins, dragons, and wizards needed more than three classes of murder.

The familiar categories of murder included ‘premeditated’, ‘intentional’, and ‘manslaughter’. But I needed something else to help me classify what happened inside the Royal dragon stables earlier this morning.

The grinding noise of steel on stone shattered my thoughts on the subject.

Light flooded the dim passageway as the gigantic double doors swung open before me and my friends. To my left, Galen let out a breath, rubbing his chin with one hand. His equine hooves *clacked* as he shifted nervously back and forth. On my right, a dismissive snort came from Shaw’s gigantic eagle’s beak. His golden lion’s tail swished irritably as the doors creaked to a stop.

Okay,” I breathed. “Let’s go look at our crime scene.”

My centaur and griffin friends remained at my side as we stepped out onto a wide stone parapet. Like much of the rest of the stables, it had the scorched-brick look of a well-used pizza oven. The parapet overlooked a cathedral-sized space, which had been subdivided into individual stalls. Each stall in turn was large enough to hold a single-engine airplane.

Three open bays punctuated the exterior wall, letting in light and the dull warmth of the late summer afternoon. However, the freshness of the outside breeze couldn’t wash away the sulphurous scent that permeated the interior. And despite the open-air feel, wrought iron chains as thick as my upper arm stretched across the place, making it feel like a gigantic prison.

Movement from the floor below caught my eye.

One set of chains tightened as the slack was picked up. A set of stall doors swung open on well-oiled hinges and out lumbered a blue-scaled nightmare.

Legs tipped with quadruple sets of claws scraped against the floor. They supported a creature that was part velociraptor, part snake, and all bad attitude. Cyan-sheened scales encased a twenty-foot long body. A lizard-like tail, leathery wings, and a pair of backwards-facing horns completed the picture.

According to the stable squires, this creature was known as 'Byzzurak, Eater of Bunnies'.

"Quite the ferocious looking creature," Galen observed.

"Pah!" Shaw scoffed. "'Tis but a stripling, and an under-fed one, at that."

Great. It was my job to find out if this 'stripling' had eaten her rider. Or if something even more insidious was afoot.

Which brought me to the why. Not the why of the possible crime at hand, but the reason I was here in this world at all. Nothing in my Chicago schooling or at the Los Angeles Police Department had prepared me for anything like this, that much was sure.

A couple weeks ago, Galen had used a spell to transport me from the Office of the Medical Examiner to the world of Andeluvia. Which wouldn't have been a bad thing if I'd been a medieval history fan looking for the ultimate Live Action Role Play.

I'd been summoned to solve the murder of Andeluvia's king. Which, being a crime scene analyst, I did. Not to everyone's satisfaction, of course. The royal dungeon now had three new tenants: the king's murderer, one of the land's most powerful lords, and a Captain of the Royal Air Cavalry.

Oh, and I had another world's worth of problems to deal with. I'd been magically snatched away from Los Angeles just as I'd been placed under police protection. Someone had taken a potshot at me with a high-powered rifle, and the LAPD didn't take that sort of thing lying down.

But my sudden disappearance had rankled the Deputy Chief of Police, Robert McClatchy. That in turn had rankled me, and things had gone downhill from there. I'd been suspended without pay until the LAPD bureaucracy decided what to do with me. So I decided to make use of my time. Lemons into lemonade and all that.

I'd received an offer from the newly-crowned King Fitzwilliam to become the Court Forensics Examiner. I wasn't sure whether to accept it. On the one hand, I'd probably get to spend more time with my newfound friends – Grimshaw the griffin, Galen the centaur wizard, and Liam, the fayleene princeling. On the other…how much use could there be for a crime scene analyst in a magical world that resembled the High Middle Ages?

Early this very morning, I found out.

Galen walked at my side down the long, high passages of King Benedict's – now King Fitzwilliam's – huge palace. Ever the gentle-centaur, he took care to move at my slower human pace. We turned a corner and he led me up a tightly coiled spiral of stairs before he finally spoke.

"I must admit that I am surprised by this turn of events," he said, as he fished a scrap of parchment out of a pocket in his wine-colored jacket. He stole a glance at it as we continued up the stairs before tucking it away again. "I expected His Majesty to summon you."

"Maybe this isn't about the job offer," I suggested, as my friend's hooves made *clacks* on the stone stairway that echoed up and down the passage. "Who's summoned me, then?"

"Commander Yervan, of the Palace Guard. He insisted the matter was serious but did not elucidate any further."

A massive wooden door banded with iron stood at the top of the stairs. Instead of knocking, Galen simply pushed his way in. I followed in the Wizard's wake, and it took a second for my eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. Sunshine flooded in through an open window, illuminating a large round room with a high peaked ceiling.

Glancing around curiously, I realized that this room was at the level capping one of the dunce cap towers that punctuated the palace walls. From the outside, it was a shingled cone topped with a red and black pennant that snapped smartly in the breeze. Inside, the walls were sparsely furnished with spare chests, a now-empty blackened hearth, and a tapestry in such a bad state of repair that it threatened to unravel if looked at directly.

A wooden table paired with a couple of carved benches lay at the

center of the room. The tabletop was empty save for a coarse cloth sack the size of a large handbag. Light gleamed from the plates of gold-trimmed armor worn by the knight standing by the far bench. He looked up from the long sheet of parchment he'd held at arm's length to read.

I recognized the man by his distinctive outfit and his reassuringly solid build. Commander Yervan and I had first met on the battlefield, where I'd faced down both an impostor and one of the ranking noblemen. He'd proven himself as an unwavering defender of the realm, in no small part by refusing to arrest or attack me on the orders of a usurper.

In a sense, he was the closest I had to an ally in the palace.

Yervan set the parchment down as we approached and made a short bow to me. I performed my mediocre-at-best curtsey in return. The corner of the man's mouth twitched, but to his credit he hid his amusement in the twinkle of an eye.

"Salutations, Lady Chrissie," he began. He nodded towards Galen. "And my thanks for bringing the Lady here, Court Wizard."

"No thanks are necessary," came the centaur's courteous reply. "Your request was hardly an onerous one."

"Well, 'the Lady' is indeed here," I said, perhaps a bit pointedly. Though 'Lady' was simply an Andeluvian term used for a woman whose social rank was unclear, it still felt odd to be addressed that way. "It's good to see you again, Commander Yervan. I heard this was an urgent matter, no doubt relating to my chosen profession."

"Really?" The big man raised an eyebrow. "How might you be so sure?"

I shrugged. "Nobody ever invites me anywhere for my sparkling personality. So either you want to talk about the forensics position that King Fitzwilliam offered me, or there's a body lying around the palace grounds you'd like me to check on."

Yervan let out a grim chuckle. "I'm starting to think that you are part soothsayer."

I let that one pass. On my first visit, Master Seer Zenos had been a rather obnoxious thorn in my side. I was on decent terms with the

man now. But I doubted that he's be happy to see me applying for a spot in the Soothsayer's Guild.

The Commander of the Palace Guard began to pace as he went on. "Even if his Majesty wished to press you into accepting the position right now, he is not physically present. Let us be frank, Lady Chrissie: our newly-crowned monarch is on unsteady and dangerous ground. He has been absent from this kingdom for many years and needs to plant his banner firmly. Even now, he rides with several of my guardsmen into both the East and West Reaches to gauge the mood of the land. And its nobles."

"That's not a bad idea," I said. "Showing the people that there's a new, active king in charge would be good thing for the country."

I was soft pedaling things there. Fitzwilliam's father may have been called the 'Good King', but he'd left the realm in shambles. Benedict's murder had nearly allowed his fractious and overeager nobles to plunge the kingdom into a bloody war with the centaurs.

"Given his Majesty's absence, a suspicious death on the palace grounds would cast a pall over his ascension. And there has been such a death. As the ranking guardsman, I would like you to investigate this matter. In the name of the crown, of course."

The Wizard looked up at that. "Perchance, has King Fitzwilliam given you authority to grant Court-level positions?"

The Commander shook his head. "That remains in his Majesty's power only."

Now it was my turn to look surprised. "So how am I to work 'in the name of the crown'?"

"I shall hire you on retainer. Specifically, I wish you to find out whether the death in question was natural or otherwise. In fact, I believe that both you and the Court Wizard should find this case… personally interesting."

Without knowing anything else, I'll admit that I was sorely tempted. Aside from being my job at the OME, solving crimes was like putting together a puzzle that only I could solve. But of course, I had to ask one last thing.

"All right, I'll bite," I said. "Why would Galen and I find it

‘personally interesting’?”

“Because it involves the men who are employed to take care of these.”

Yervan reached for the cloth bag atop the table and jerked open its drawstrings. Something *clinked* as he reached inside, drawing out a pair of bronze circlets and sliding them unceremoniously across the table’s surface. Each circlet was pitted with acid and etched by dragon fire.

But I could still make out the damning words.

Property of the Royal Stables of King Benedict.

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Chapter Two

These circlets had come from the forearms of two combat-trained dragons from the Royal Air Cavalry. Specifically, from a stable run by Captain Vazura. This pair of reptiles had done their damnedest to roast both me and the Court Wizard.

Vazura did his best to play down the incident. *Accidents happen. Dragons can escape their tethers when one is inattentive.* Now there had been another death involving the dragons at that same stable. And I'd get to meet the men who'd 'accidentally' released two of Andeluvia's reptilian weapons of mass destruction.

Commander Yervan hadn't been joking when he said that I'd find this case of personal interest. He'd been serious. Deadly serious.

Galen's dark brows came together as he rubbed his chin in thought, a forehoof tapping the stone floor as he did so. I turned to him, placing a hand on his elbow, which was the highest point on his body I could comfortably reach.

"What do you think?" I asked. "I'm going to be on retainer, but you're not. If you're busy doing something else, I can't ask you to work with me on this."

"Since I already serve at the behest of the crown, I do not need a special 'retainer'," the Wizard pointed out. "I would not leave your side in this matter, Dayna. Perhaps my magic may yet aid you again."

I did my level best to keep from beaming at that.

"Let's hear some more about this case," I said, as I pulled out a bench and took a seat. Yervan followed suit. "You've definitely got our attention."

The Commander tapped the parchment with his index finger as he began. "This report comes from the palace's South Keep. It is one of two locations we previously used to stable dragon mounts and their riders for defense of the Capital."

"Previously used?"

"Despite what the Air Cavalry might say, dragons are only moderately trainable. Once we struck a treaty with the aerie west of

Kescar, the cavalry has transitioned to working with griffins instead. The North Keep was shut down and is used only for ceremonial purposes."

I nodded. That explained the two extra-large towers I'd seen at the northern and southern end of the defensive walls. These places were a good long walk in either direction from the main palace.

"Early this morning, a knight named Sir Farroway was found torn apart at the South Keep. It happened as he was taking a dragon mount out on a training flight. His remains have already been sent to the House of Hospitalliers."

"Torn apart?" Galen exclaimed. "Do you mean to imply that this knight's dragon committed this act?"

"It does seem to follow."

"Just before a training flight," I observed. "Could this be an accident caused by lack of experience?"

The Commander let out a dry laugh.

"Unlikely. The 'training' in this flight was for the newly fledged *dragon*, not the man. Sir Farroway was known to be quite…shall we say, 'flawed' in character. But incompetence was not among his vices."

"Perhaps not, but I do recall this particular knight," Galen said, frowning. "Farroway was a singularly unpleasant individual. His attitude was remarkably similar to that of his immediate superior, Captain Vazura."

"Birds of a feather," I murmured. "Definitely flocking together."

Vazura was in the dungeon now, but he definitely had a spot on my list of Least Favorite People. Unfortunately, he wasn't at the bottom. When it came to the people I'd had to deal with recently, I didn't have a pet peeve so much as a whole kennel of aggravation.

Commander Yervan spread his hands. "And yet, Sir Farroway was liked by many of the lords at court. It is why he was promoted as Captain Vazura's second-in-command. Which brings me to the final reason I asked for you to take this case."

That got my attention. I gave Yervan a questioning look as he continued.

"As the ranking officer in the Palace Guards, I am responsible for

administering justice while our new ruler is brought up to speed. And I was impressed by your abilities with 'forensics' to unveil the usurper to this kingdom's throne."

He leaned forward, placing his hands on the table as he spoke. The gold trim on his armor glowed fiercely as it encountered a stray sunbeam. His voice carried a note of urgency I'd never heard before.

"I firmly believe that you could be a real asset to King Fitzwilliam. Especially if you can solve this mystery before he returns in the next few days. Before it becomes a thorn in his side, or worse, a festering danger that threatens to impale him."

"I see why you need this taken care of, and quickly," I allowed. "Yet, while it might impress the King, I'm hardly held in high esteem by the nobles on the Royal Court."

"No. You are not. The decision to bring you to our world wasn't made by them. And the fact remains that you cannot buy trust at any price. But slowly, over time, you can build it for free."

"How do you mean?"

"Solving a case involving our dragon riders would carry a lot of weight. Should you succeed, many shall talk about your abilities. Yet more shall realize that your work unmasking the former King's murderer was no fluke. Lady Chrissie, you may lack the highborn ancestry to win over our nobles. But where birthright fails, sheer ability often wins through."

I traded a glance with Galen. He nodded in the affirmative.

"It looks like we're both up for this," I said to Yervan.

That was an understatement.

Oh, I was taking this case.

An entire squadron of Air Cavalry couldn't have pulled me away from this one.

* * *

A stray tress of hair blew across my face, interfering with my vision. I stopped for a moment to brush it out of the way. Galen, who still trotted at my side, halted as I did so.

Winds often shrieked over the stone walkway atop the castle battlements. But there were things that compensated for it. For

starters, the air was untainted by the usual background scents in the palace proper: cooking food, burning tallow, stale wine, and staler people. It also kept me away from the bustle of servants and the stares of guardsmen curious to ogle the 'outworld woman'.

And then there was the excellent view.

Closer in, fine stone houses with shingled roofs clustered right up to the palace walls. Blocks of these houses were punctuated by city streets that stretched out into smaller, lesser dwellings. Further out, the paved streets gave way to dirt roads leading through emerald stretches of rich farmland and neatly kept orchards. On the horizon lay patches of deep forest green, the bare plateau leading up to the centaur lands, or steep-sided gray mountains.

I looked further up the battlement and grimaced. A good-sized walk still separated me from the South Keep. By 'good sized', I meant it was long enough for me to consider asking Galen to give me a ride. But that really wasn't what was bothering me.

"What vexes you so?" the Wizard asked, as he read my expression.

"I thought it was the distance to the Keep," I sighed. "But it's not that, really. Time is vexing me more than distance."

"How so?"

"Yervan was right about this case being 'personal'. I just wish that the timing wasn't so awful for once. Galen, I've got to return to Los Angeles this afternoon for an appointment. One I can't miss."

The Wizard began to reply when a shadow fell across his face. He looked up, then grabbed me by the shoulders. I didn't have time to utter a peep in protest as his huge centaur hands wrapped warmly about my upper arms.

Lifting me as if I were a child, Galen trotted back three or four paces. He put me down just as the shadow loomed large overhead and a new downdraft of wind tussled my hair. The golden-furred form of a lion swooped in, landing hard on the battlement in front of us.

Grimshaw gave a *squawk* of surprise as he came close to rolling head over tail. He quickly furled his wings and shook his proud eagle head as if to clear it. His leonine tail thrashed in annoyance as he righted himself and turned to face us.

Had the Wizard not moved me, I'd have been knocked down. Or turned into the bottom layer of a human-griffin pancake.

Shaw looked embarrassed. That was an emotion I never thought I would see on the big griffin's face, and it melted me a little inside.

"Have I injured either of thee?" he asked. "Alas, my skills of flight have not fully returned."

"We're okay, big guy," I assured him. I stepped up to give him some scratches atop his head the way he liked. He gratefully accepted the affection as I added, "Galen's reflexes saved us from that landing. Let's see that wing of yours."

Shaw extended the wing that had taken both a bullet and the brunt of an explosion in my world. The cast was off and his burns had vanished. But many of the snow-white feathers were still growing back in.

"You're still not completely healed," I pointed out. "Without a full complement of feathers, your wing can't generate enough lift for you to fly properly."

"Thou art right, Dayna. But a restlessness stirs within mine own veins."

"Do not let that get the better of your nature," Galen counseled. "You must learn patience."

"Aye, aye," Shaw agreed, peevishly. "But dost thou know how long *that* shall take?"

The Wizard let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Where's Liam?" I asked. Since our recent return to the palace, the fayleene stag could be reliably found keeping the griffin company.

Shaw made an amused *clack* of his beak. "Sleeping like a tasty little fawn."

I ignored the 'tasty' bit. "He's still sleeping? It's already past noon!"

"Oh, 'tis not the princeling's fault. 'Twas a rough time last evening. A new shipment of dewleaf wine arrived, and we decided to see which of us might drink more of it. Mayhap things got out of hand. We found it more than a wee bit difficult walking towards night's end. Liam fell forward and got his antler stuck in the soft wood

of the chamber door."

"You did help him, I hope?"

"'Twas the honorable thing to do! When I pulled him free, he thanked me and said, 'Thou art not so bad for someone who wishes to eat me.' I agreed, of course."

"About not being so bad? Or wishing to eat him?"

"'Tis a matter that depends on the state of mine own stomach, methinks."

"Shaw…" I said warningly.

"I jest! The fayleene is too tough and sinewy to make much of a meal. Though one hears that dewleaf wine can flavor and tenderize meat–"

Galen quickly cleared his throat. "Actually, we are in mid-journey to the South Keep. There has been a suspicious death amongst the Air Cavalry. It could be an accident involving the dragons, or a murder most foul. We have been tasked with looking into it."

The griffin let out a husky grunt at the news.

"Hmph. 'Tis as likely as not an accident. Dragons are trouble, for they are not intelligent and honorable creatures like mine own griffinkind. 'Ware for trouble in such a place."

"We shall be wary."

"Wary might be good, but defending oneself, 'tis a whole different matter! I shall accompany thee, if thou shalt have me."

The centaur inclined his head. "A warrior such as yourself is always welcome. Especially when there is a possible murder at issue."

That's not quite right, I realized. *This isn't a possible murder. It's a* likely *one.*

"Wait a minute," I said. "Shaw, you're welcome to join us, of course. But we're not heading to the South Keep, not yet."

Galen frowned. "Shouldn't seeing the crime scene be our top priority?"

"Not the *top* one, no." I looked over to my griffin friend. "Shaw, we'll meet you tomorrow morning. Right now, I need to see the body. And that means we're off to the Hospitalliers."

Shaw nodded his acceptance. Galen let out a resigned sigh.

“So be it. I suppose you shall be sticking rods into dead flesh again?

“I doubt it,” I said, as I turned to leave. “Based on what Commander Yervan told us, there won’t be enough left for us to poke into much of anything.”

The Wizard shuddered as he followed in my wake.

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Chapter Three

The entrance to the House of Hospitalliers uncomfortably straddled the line between ‘grand’ and ‘comical’. A triple set of wide stone steps led up to a set of marble columns that wouldn’t have looked out of place at the Acropolis. That is, if each column hadn’t been painted like a barbershop pole in a swirl of vanilla cream and strawberry jam red.

Unlike the last time I was here, the entryway lacked the pair of bored guardsmen. However, the same fussy-looking old woman stood at the top, directing a pair of litter bearers inside. She wore a floor length white cloak trimmed in scarlet and had her ash-gray hair pinned back in a tight knot above the nape of her neck.

The woman raised an eyebrow as she caught sight of our approach. I hadn’t caught her name during my prior visit. Luckily, Galen came galloping to the rescue yet again.

“Salutations, Mistress Hildegard,” the centaur said, with a smooth bow. “Might I assume that you recall the prior visit by myself and Lady Chrissie?”

Hildegard made a bow in return. Her voice carried a distinct rasp. “I seem to recall your being here before, Wizard. The arrival of ‘Lady Chrissie’ is something I am less sure of.”

The older woman gave me a coolly appraising look.

After hesitating a second, I did a little bob that I hoped would pass for something vaguely courteous. If Hildegard noticed how bad it was, she let it pass. I spoke up to fill the awkward silence.

“You might not remember me,” I said in a rush. “But I was here with Galen to examine the remains of the King – that is, the former Good King Benedict.”

“I see,” came the reply. Hildegard’s expression warmed slightly. “While I don’t recall speaking to you, I do know the power of your work. You brought justice where it was needed, and for that everyone who serves this House is grateful.”

Galen cleared his throat. “By chance, we are here on a similar

matter. Perhaps you received a communication from the Commander of the Palace Guard?"

"Yervan? Oh, yes. You must want to see the remains of that dragon knight he asked us to save. Come along, I shall show you where these are being kept."

Hildegard turned on her heel, motioning for us to follow. She led the way through the House of the Hospitalliers at a pace that made the folds of her cloak rustle behind her. I found myself needing to step lively to keep up.

The House's main corridor started to grow crowded as we made our way further into the heart of the building. About a third of the people we passed wore cloaks like Mistress Hildegard's, while the remainder were ordinary townsfolk. Several of the latter group bore bandaged limbs or wore a cloth wrap over their mouths to muffle coughs or sneezes.

We entered a large, bustling room at the intersection of several corridors. Circular skylights cut in the ceiling had been propped open to allow light in and air to circulate. My face must have worn an expression of astonishment, as Mistress Hildegard stopped and addressed me.

"You seem surprised," she said.

"I guess I am," I admitted, as I looked around. "Your people do a lot more than manage a morgue here."

The large room was divided into a couple of different sections. A white-cloaked woman stood at the front, directing new entrants to the appropriate area with the efficiency of a traffic cop. Once sorted, people either waited in line before an open counter, reclined on rough wooden benches waiting their turn, or lay (conscious or not) upon simple cloth and pole litters.

The busiest section was a makeshift medical ward. A carpenter in a brown and red-stained outfit was quickly led into an adjoining room as blood dripped from a jagged spur of wood protruding from his forearm. Two farmers with broad-brimmed straw hats perched atop their heads waited their turn next. One had a bandaged foot and homemade crutch, while the other held a makeshift compress filled

with a mat of greenish mush over his swollen eye.

I immediately saw where that compress had come from. Just next to the 'trauma' area, a man wearing a royal badge marking him as one of the palace physicians instructed others on how to process and bundle raw herbs. Scents of rosemary, lavender, and something peppery made my nose tingle. A team of raw-boned women in rough peasant dresses sat in a circle, speaking quietly to one other as they stripped leaves from stems or turned seeds into paste with a stone mortar and pestle.

At another section, white-cloaked Hospitalliers seated at a table looked over a silver dagger in the shape of a dragon's tooth. A single red gem adorned the hilt. The man who'd handed it to them wore the tattered remains of a guard's uniform. Waiting behind him was a small group of people. A washerwoman in a still-damp outfit. A tired-looking mother who cradled her newborn child in a mass of mossy green cloth. Behind her stood a pinch-cheeked merchant carrying a gilded wooden box under one arm.

"As you see," Mistress Hildegard explained, "We collect those who fall and treat them with honor. But we also treat wounded soldiers, provide medical care for the poor and elderly among us, and provide hospice care for the dying."

I chewed that over as I watched the tattered-looking man collect a small handful of coins. He seemed grateful for the pittance he'd received. The mother stepped up, took a gold ring from her pocket and handed it over for inspection. She was followed by the washerwoman, who shook out some tiny bits of jewelry from a bag onto the table.

"Does the King pay for any of this?" I inquired.

"His Majesty has been kind enough to continue in the wake of his father," came the reply. "Good King Benedict granted us this dwelling free of charge, and King Fitzwilliam ensured that the Office of the Exchequer provides half of our monthly expenses."

"Where does the other half come from?"

"Donations from the greater and more merciful lords, or revenue from the clients themselves. We accept what coin they can spare." She

nodded towards the table where both the mother and the washerwoman had received a couple of silver coins. “Those in extreme distress can place property in our care until a set sum is paid back, or we sell it to those who wish to purchase.”

That was interesting. To my mind, the House of the Hospitalliers operated like a cross between a hospital and a pawn shop. But it seemed to work for everyone concerned. Hildegard led us down a second corridor and indicated the arched doorway at the end with a sweep of her hand.

“We have woven our preservation spells about the body,” she said. “Take as long as you need. Summon me if you should require anything.”

Galen and I said our thanks and went through the indicated entrance. As when I’d examined Benedict’s corpse, passing the preservation spell’s boundary felt like walking through a sticky, dew-coated spider web. My skin crawled.

Any discomfort faded away as we stepped out into the bright spot in the center of the room. Another skylight high above cast light upon a stone slab and a pair of wooden tables. One table was heaped with the remnants of a red-and-black uniform and a sword still in its scabbard. The scraps making up the uniform were stiff with dried blood. An iron scent wafted from the pile.

The other table held a set of carved wooden bowls and a smattering of metal instruments used by the Hospitalliers. It wasn’t much, but they would enable me to do my work.

One of the wooden bowls held a pair of crude gloves. Another was filled with a type of bleach. I gloved up, swiped my fingers through the disinfectant, and began my initial survey. Galen pulled out a sheet of parchment and prepared to take notes. His nose wrinkled at the smell of dried blood and body fluids, but he didn’t back away.

On the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent definitely still pending), this corpse barely nudged a ‘three’. If Commander Yervan’s reports were to be believed, then death had occurred no more than nine or ten hours ago. Compared to the relatively advanced state of decomposition of King Benedict, this was extremely fresh.

Yet what this body had in ‘freshness’, it lacked in *volume*.

Great chunks of flesh had been ripped from the former Sir Farroway. In fact, the front lower torso below the ribcage had been stripped clean of muscle, sinew, and viscera. I peered through the ragged edges of the hole that had once been the abdominal cavity, only to see red-filmed vertebrae at the back.

The pelvis and left leg were completely gone. The right leg sat on the slab off to one side, as if placed there as an afterthought. The head of the femur, a ball-shaped nub that fit into the missing hip socket, gleamed wetly at me.

Galen shuddered as we looked over what was left of Farroway’s head. About three-quarters of the skull was missing. The last quarter revealed a domed head with a fringe of long brown hair, one ear with two long-healed piercings in the lobe, and a single eye. The eye stared sightlessly at the ceiling, a dried brown marble unattached to anything solid behind it.

The interior of the skull was a pulped mess of bone fragments, brain matter, and soft palate tissues. A film of an unknown sticky substance clung to many of the surfaces.

“Interesting,” I remarked. “I can definitely smell sulfur, but not acid. Any idea why?”

The Wizard replied immediately. “Certainly. You are referencing our prior encounter in the Fayleene Woods. Dragons have acidic compounds in their blood, not their saliva.”

I considered for a moment. “If the dragon in question ‘tore him apart’, then the creature could have used his teeth, not his claws.”

“I would consider that a distinct possibility, Dayna.”

Very distinct, as a matter of fact. The jagged tears of razor-sharp teeth that a Great White Shark would have envied were present along all the open cavities. It also explained the relatively ‘dry’ texture of the remaining surfaces.

Every drop of Farroway’s blood would have been lost through these truly catastrophic wounds. The only area where fluid might have pooled was around the base of the neck. The struck-match smell of sulfur was strongest near the bottom of the skull cavity. Marks of

flame and singed, cauterized flesh attested to the near-hit of dragon fire.

This had been one pissed-off beast, that much was for sure. Sad as it might be, this dragon rider had somehow run afoul of his mount's nature. An incident of such animal savagery was unknown on my world, but in this one–

I froze as I went over what was left of the corpse's head more carefully a second time. A flap of skin and dark red tissue peeled back from the scalp just above the ear. A deep cut, that was for sure, one that would have hurt badly and bled like no one's business. And it was a damned clean cut, too.

I went around the side of the table to look more closely at the body's left shoulder and arm. Galen followed, his expression one of curiosity, and his hand poised to take notes as soon as I chose to give any. But my mouth suddenly felt too parched to speak.

Sir Farroway's body was marked with a series of V-shaped cuts between the shoulder and neck. In a couple of places, the cuts had cracked the collarbone. I grabbed the corpse's hand and turned it over to face palm-side up.

The hand practically fell apart. It had been nearly cleaved in two by a very sharp blade. My heart raced with the twin fuels of any crime scene examiner when they find compelling evidence. Apprehension and excitement.

"These weren't made by the teeth or claws of a dragon," I breathed. "These are defensive wounds. Sir Farroway was killed trying to protect himself against someone with a blade."

Galen snorted, and stamped a forehoof. "You mean this was not an unfortunate accident, I take it."

I shook my head.

"No. We're looking at murder, plain and simple."

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Chapter Four

Galen's charcoal stylus made a rapid *skritch-skritch* as it flew across the page. To his credit, the centaur managed to keep up with my rapid fire stream of measurements and observations. If he ever got tired of wizardry, I could easily find him work in Los Angeles as a transcriptionist.

"–the lower forearm appears to be free of open wounds or contusions," I continued, as I returned to the nearly split left hand. I spread it out with my gloves like the remains of a mangled red spider. "A severe laceration, at least ninety millimeters long and half as deep, runs across the palmar surface of the left hand."

I paused for a moment to spread the gaping wound open a little wider with my gloved thumbs. The centaur continued to peer over my shoulder. He made a little *tsk* as he saw the severity of the wound.

"Sub-dermal examination reveals that multiple flexor tendons were damaged and at least two severed. The wound is slightly incised, so that a skin tag or 'flap' runs along one of the two wound surfaces."

Galen finished jotting this down, and then set the stylus behind his ear for a moment. He shook his hand as if his fingers were starting to ache. I took the hint and stood back from the corpse, examining it without further comment.

"What can one glean from these observations?" he asked. "You used the phrase 'defensive wounds', but I am not familiar with that particular terminology."

I pulled off the gloves and carefully set them aside. "'Defensive wounds' are a general term we use for injuries received by a victim while trying to defend against an assailant, usually an armed one."

The Wizard's brow wrinkled in confusion. "I did not realize that your 'forensics' could tell if someone was on the attack, or in retreat."

"The evidence left behind after a physical attack tells you a lot more than you'd think. You won't find certain types of injuries on people who are tied up, or unconscious. Specific wounds tell us that the attacked person was conscious and able to use their limbs for

protection, at least at the start of the fight. Here, let me show you what I mean."

I reached under the closer table and found a long wooden ruler on the shelf below. Then I pulled it out and gave it to Galen. The Wizard held it gingerly in his right hand as I took a half step back.

"Okay, pretend that the ruler is a sword, and you were about to strike me down with it," I said. He shifted his grip and raised the improvised 'sword'. Then he brought it down slowly, with no real force behind it. I moved my arm up in response. "Stop!"

Galen froze, his arm held halfway through a downward chop.

"See what I did instinctively?" I asked.

"You have your closest hand – the left – raised palm up to block my blow," he said, as his head swiveled between me and the victim's terrible hand wound.

"So Sir Farroway must have blocked one of the blows in this fight with his hand," I said. "He acted defensively, instinctively."

The Wizard nodded. "And the other wounds?"

I lowered my arm. "Finish your swing."

He brought the ruler down to tap my collarbone. Again, he looked back at the corpse in wonder. "So someone rained blows down upon Sir Farroway, causing those cuts."

"Got it in one. Given how clean these cuts are, we're talking about a very sharp weapon like a sword or an axe. Probably a sword, though. I don't think I've seen anyone lugging a battle axe around the palace."

"Swords are the approved gear for this kingdom," Galen agreed.

"In fact, since those chops were brought down at a high angle, I'm thinking that whoever did the deed was taller than our victim."

The Wizard chewed that over for a second. His next words were slightly timid. "Might I also make a reasoned assumption?"

"Go right ahead, my friend."

"Since the sword strikes between the shoulder and neck chipped bone and cleaved muscle, I surmise that the injury to the hand happened earlier in the fight. That is, while the defender could still raise his arm."

“Well-reasoned logic there,” I said, and the Galen practically glowed with the compliment. “In fact, I’m thinking that the hit to Farroway’s hand was the *first* blow in the fight.”

“Hm. How would you come to this conclusion?”

“In Andeluvia, what’s the first thing a knight does when attacked?”

Galen’s answer came instantly. “Draw his sword.”

“Yes, but I’m betting that in this case, the victim never touched his weapon.” To make sure, I reached across one of the tables and picked up Farroway’s scabbard. I grabbed the hilt of the sword within and gave it an experimental tug. With the slick sound of metal on leather, it came free. The weapon’s blemish-free blade gleamed under the bright skylight.

“I see no blood, nor any other marks,” Galen observed. “This weapon never left its scabbard during the fight. Perhaps Commander Yervan was right. You need to apply to the Soothsayer’s Guild. How did you know?”

“Sir Farroway’s left hand has callus patterns around the edges of his palm. That indicates he normally used it to draw and wield his weapon,” I explained. “But he *couldn’t* draw his sword this time. Not when his opponent had almost split his weapon-using hand in two. And that tells us something else.”

“What might that be?”

“Whoever attacked Sir Farroway must have known him. They knew enough to strike at his sword hand and eliminate this knight’s ability to defend himself.”

The light glinted off Farroway’s weapon as I sheathed it. That made me think of something from my first case involving Andeluvia. I carefully slipped on the gloves once more and grabbed the Hospitalliers version of forceps from the table. Then I began probing the deepest sections of the body’s wounds.

“Are you looking for something else to unravel this attacker’s identity, perchance?” Galen asked, looking slightly perturbed by my continued work.

“It’s just a hunch.” I finished fishing around inside the hand

wound and moved back up to the collarbone area. “I remember finding something else on that body you sent back into my world. Aside from the transport medallion you placed on it for me to find.”

At that moment, I felt a little ‘clink’ at the end of the forceps. I carefully withdrew a jagged sliver of metal from the deepest of the collarbone wounds and held it up to the light. I didn’t have a handy plastic bag to store the sample, but Galen pulled an empty spice container from one of his jacket’s many pockets. That was as good as I was going to get for now.

“Your machines at the OME should tell you much about that,” the Wizard observed.

“They might, but they can’t for now. I’m on…well, call it semi-permanent leave. They won’t admit me to the labs at the OME.”

“I dislike the idea of having to sneak back into that building. Once was enough, thank you.”

“That’s not going to be necessary,” I assured him, as I held up the bag. “This shard isn’t a bullet, so we don’t need high resolution photographs or anything sophisticated. I have some personal gear stashed away in my office, I’ll pick it up. It’s enough to do some basic chemical tests on this bit of evidence. The only problem is that it’ll take longer. Probably a few hours to get some of the reagents to work properly.”

“You did say that you had to return to Los Angeles this afternoon,” Galen pointed out. “Perhaps the best course of action would be to reconvene upon the following morning.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Shall we meet at the Great Hall?”

“I’ve got too many bad memories there.” I removed the gloves, placing them aside again. A thought occurred to me. “You know, I liked the privacy of that tower room, the one where we met Commander Yervan earlier.”

“You can trust me to make the proper arrangements.”

“I trust you to do a lot more than that,” I said. “Perhaps you could blip me back home, conserve the juice I have left on your medallion?”

“But of course,” the Wizard said, as he set down the ruler.

Galen raised his hands, intoning the spell to send me on my way. I felt the familiar tickle and dizziness of transport grab me by the stomach even as the stench of ozone flooded my nose.

The funereally dark room of the Hospitalliers vanished in a blur of white sparks.

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Chapter Five

Late summer in Southern California normally means bone dry weather.

Normally.

Not today. The one day that I had to keep an appointment at the Office of the Medical Examiner, and that's when the local low-pressure systems decided to host a cloudburst. And of course, nobody in Los Angeles really knows how to drive in any kind of weather. On the radio, the traffic warnings local residents called 'Sigalerts' took up half of an entire news segment.

I sat in my car and fumed about it all, with the windows up, wipers on, and both defrosters on high. The strange thing about rain in Southern California is that it isn't all that refreshing. Once the droplets stopped, they evaporated into warm, sticky moisture that fogged up windows and ruined hairdos.

Once home, I'd spent maybe half an hour before pulling out of my driveway. Two or three minutes spent shaking off the nausea caused by the magical mode of travel. Twenty-five minutes to eat, shower, and change clothes. And another two or three to adjust my brand spanking new shoulder holster and store it in the trunk of my car.

Just touching the holster and the firearm that fit snugly inside made me think of Detective Esteban. Alanzo and I hadn't gone on a 'real' date yet, but we'd at least pried ourselves free from our duties at the OME and Homicide to have lunch. I'd returned his gun and the borrowed shoulder holster. He'd suggested that I 'replace and practice'.

So I did. Andeluvia had convinced me that a firearm could come in handy, so I bought what I needed and even snuck in a little practice drawing and shooting at a local indoor range. I'd never be Annie Oakley, but at least the damned thing didn't feel so unwanted and alien as before.

Even though I'd left almost three hours early, the rain and the LA drivers had to screw up my plans. I slid into a parking spot with only

a few minutes to spare before my appointment.

My umbrella protected what dryness my hair had left, but the rain decided to come down slantwise and drench my feet as I crossed the parking lot. I slogged my way through the OME building's security checkpoint, forcing myself to slow to a walk. Even if I was late, one slip on a wet marble floor would add a broken elbow or something worse to my day.

I turned the corner to head towards the Human Resources Department and felt the *squelch* of my feet inside wet shoes. Then the air conditioning kicked in, chilling me from the knees on down. Finally, with a sigh of both relief and frustration, I got close enough to my destination to read the letters stenciled neatly on the door: *OME Councilor Vickie Lewellyn*.

A sneeze snuck up without warning, doubling me over. I followed that up with a second '*wha-CHOO!*' for emphasis. Then a third one, that almost made my feet slip out from under me. I put my hand against the wall to steady myself.

The door opened. A willowy, curly-haired blonde in 'Casual Friday' crop pants and a pink paisley top peeked out. She extended a hand to me, which was nice. That hand held a box of tissues, which was even better. I snatched one and blew my nose into it.

"Thank you," I said, though it came out more like 'thag yew'.

"No problem!" came the breezy reply. "You must be Dayna Chrissie, right?"

"That's me," I replied, with a final sniffle. "And you're…Councilor Lewellyn?"

She made a cute little shrug. "You can call me Vickie if I can call you Dayna. And it was very sweet of you, but next time, you don't have to wait out here until your appointment time, okay?"

"I wasn't waiting out–"

But 'Vickie' had already turned and whisked her way back into her office.

I followed, carefully shutting the door behind me. Lewellyn's office was positively luxurious compared to mine. I had space for two bookshelves and a desk, and that was about it. She had five times the

space, easy. It had been done up with recessed track lighting, a veritable forest of potted plants, and a bug-eyed goldfish who looked indignant about being put in a glass bowl.

About the only thing I had that Lewellyn didn't was a window with a slice of the lawn for a view. Instead, she sat in front of a faux brick wall with a framed poster mounted just to the right of her plush leather chair. The poster read, in big friendly crayon letters:

WHAT YOU SAY IN HERE
STAYS IN HERE
UNLESS…

Someone is hurting you.
You want to hurt yourself.
You give permission to share with another trusted adult.

"Now, if you would give me just a moment," she chirped, "I just need to get everything in hand. You know how stuff gets thrown together around here at the last minute."

"Sure thing," I replied, as I took the visitor's seat across the desk.

It was a comfy seat, one that made my back and bottom sink in. It was also two or three inches too low. My groping hand couldn't find any lever to adjust it.

Lewellyn picked up a coffee mug labeled *BEST COUNSELOR EVER!* and a manila folder off the top of her file cabinet. She hummed as she walked in short, measured steps behind her desk, took her seat, and opened the folder. A quick scan and her smile winked back on like a little neon sign.

"Well now, it looks like we do need to have a little talk," she said. "You've been referred to me by Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy over at the LAPD."

"That's why I'm here," I agreed, trying to sound half as cheerful as her. And failing miserably, I might add.

Lewellyn dipped her head and went back to the file.

"Oh, dear. Your disappearance while under police protection

caused quite a few ripples. McClatchy himself talked to me at length about you. He told me how worried he was about your temper. And your emotional stability."

Okay, that was out of left field. Bob and I had a love-hate relationship, so far as I was concerned. That is, we loved to hate each other.

I did my best to seem indifferent. "You'll have to judge my 'stability' yourself, then. I haven't had any crying fits in quite a while. At least not since I quit trying to fit into my yoga pants."

The *Best Counsellor Ever* gave me a nonplussed look. Well, that joke had gone over like a lead-plated balloon. Her voice remained annoyingly bubbly, but I could hear the finger-shaking in its tone.

"Yoga is a proven stress reliever, and an activity that releases endorphins. Perhaps you should consider trying it again, along with a green-focused diet."

Green-focused? Well, maybe Liam could give me some pointers there.

"All the same," she continued, "You do give off a 'balanced' air. That's not a tell-tale for instability."

"Uh-huh."

"So, I'm just going to take this concern of 'emotional instability' right out of this record, is that all right with you?"

"I'm fine with that."

Yeah, I thought, *Like you were really giving me a choice.*

"On the other hand – isn't that a funny expression? – I am concerned with the comment about temper. You do get angry with people, don't you?"

"Well…I do get frustrated sometimes. That should be perfectly normal."

"Of course it is! We're all human, aren't we?"

She laughed in that annoyingly chirpy way and I joined in. Just two women, sharing a happy moment like a pair of sisters. Our combined laughter made a tinny, flat sound that set my teeth on edge.

"However, it's 'how' we vent that frustration that's important," Lewellyn reminded me. "How would you rate your people skills,

Dayna?"

"My people skills are fine. It's my tolerance of idiots that needs some work."

Lewellyn winced.

"The Deputy Chief claimed that you were irrationally angry about being protected by his officers. That's why I agreed to counsel you before you go in front of the probation board. You do think that you could use some help in this area, don't you?"

She bobbed her head, signaling me to nod in agreement.

I didn't.

A full two-count of silence passed.

"Well," she sighed, "this has been fun."

"Barrel of monkeys," I murmured, but Lewellyn didn't hear me. She was busy rummaging in one of her desk drawers for something as I got up. A little *squelch* came from down around my toes.

"Don't forget tomorrow!" she said brightly. "Same time, same place!"

"As if I could."

"Oh! And in the meantime, I have something that might help you with that temper issue."

Counsellor Lewellyn found what she was looking for. She held up a bright blue sphere the size of a tennis ball. Then she threw it to me. I caught it, giving the thing an experimental heft.

"I don't think this ball is going to help me," I said skeptically. "It's much too light to hurt anyone I throw it at."

A thundercloud crossed the woman's face.

"It's a stress ball. For *squeezing*, you know?"

To emphasize the point, she brought her hands up and made a pincer-like motion with them.

"Right, right. I've got it, thanks."

"Dayna, you know that I value clear communication, right?" she asked, turning that neon smile on again. Only this time, it was tipped with flashing warning lights. "I need to see that you're making some kind of progress on a way to control that temper of yours. Otherwise, I just can't sign off on your papers."

That stopped me. “What papers?”

“Why, the papers to send you in front of the probation board, of course! If you don’t get in front of them, you’ll remain suspended without pay for…well, I’d hesitate to even guess what might happen.”

I crossed my arms. “Indulge me.”

“Well, once you’ve been suspended for more than ninety days, your contract with the OME would just be terminated.” She let out a regretful sigh. “But I just know that won’t happen. Life has a way of sorting itself out for those who want to change, right?”

She bobbed her head again.

This time I took the hint and did the nodding thing too.

“Of course,” I said heavily. “See you tomorrow.”

She waggled her fingers in a ‘bye’ motion as I shut the door.

I stopped by my office and dug out a battered leather attaché case from behind a desk. It didn’t look like much, but what I’d stored inside would be useful in Andeluvia. Then I made my way back down the corridors and out to the security checkpoint. The dull grumble of thunder echoed in the damp, marble floored space. The rapidly growing *sizzle-pop* sound of rain coming down in wet sheets came next. Right in time for me to cross the lot back to my car.

Finally, I released the pained groan I had been holding back ever since returning to my world.

Just my rotten luck.

When it rained, it effing *poured* for Miss Dayna Chrissie.

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Chapter Six

The magical transport to Andeluvia was never easy, but it felt like I got *spat* out this time. I stumbled out of the eye-frying whiteness and spun halfway around as I clutched the attaché case to my chest. A strong hand grabbed my right shoulder and a warm feathery wing braced my left.

"Never fear, I have you," Galen's voice spoke from by my ear.

"Aye, thou art safe now," Shaw's voice rumbled in my other ear.

"Thanks, guys," I said. They let go as I righted myself. One of the bands of my shoulder holster had slipped or twisted during transport. I had to stick my hand under my jacket to adjust it. "I'm not sure what happened there."

"If I had to guess," came a third, Gaelic-accented voice, "It was your hand case that threw your balance off. Welcome back, Dayna."

I turned to see Liam's cervine form as he trotted over to me. He made one of his dashing bows, complete with a sweep of his antlers. Well, sweep of his 'antler'. The princeling would've been classified as a smart-looking, six-point buck had he not lost one in his youth.

Liam stood out from his fellow fayleene in two other ways. His right eye was the standard cervine brown, while its opposite number was emerald green. More interestingly, a diamond stud earring twinkled from its spot in his left ear. I'd purchased it for him to cover up a hole put there by an overzealous park ranger.

"I spoke with our griffin warrior and fayleene princeling shortly after updating Commander Yervan," Galen explained. "They wished to be here when you returned, off-balance or no. Speaking of which, what *are* you carrying?"

Shaw poked at the case with his beak before giving it a sniff. "Methinks nothing of importance, as I scent nothing to eat within."

Now that my head finally stopped spinning, I looked around. We were back in the tower room under the dunce cap turret. Moving over to the table that Commander Yervan had been using the other day, I set the case down and opened it with a *click* of its twin locks.

“Guys,” I explained, “this is my improvised field kit.”

I turned the case around to show off the carefully packed microscope and chemical reagent set from my household stocks. It wasn’t much, but it would be enough for basic work. I hoped. I made a mental note to snag one of the big silver-cased evidence kits we stored in the OME van once I got off suspension.

I thought of Counsellor Lewellyn and grimaced. Make that *if* I got off suspension.

“I already ran some chemical tests on that sliver I took off Farroway’s corpse,” I said, as I held up the little metal piece in a transparent plastic bag. “It’s what we call ‘blister steel’ in my world. So, there’s no doubt that it’s Andeluvian in origin.”

“Interesting,” Galen said. “Yet, will this further our investigation?”

“Well, at least it doesn’t lead off-world. If you look closely at the shard, it’s clearly been broken off from the edge of a blade. We should be able to identify which weapon it came from by simply matching the break pattern.”

Shaw peered at the sliver with his golden eagle’s eyes. “Might it have come from a weapon that was discarded after the attack?”

“That’s possible,” I acknowledged. “But this shard is very small. That’s not enough for most people to discard a blade in this world. I still think we should check all the weapons in the area first, along with viewing the crime scene and interviewing any witnesses to the event. Sound good?”

“I think it sounds excellent,” Liam said, before adding regretfully, “I wish I could join you.”

“Thou wouldst turn down the chance for adventure?” Shaw asked incredulously.

“And the chance to perish gloriously, yes. I was just informed that one of my kind has arrived with a message from the Fayleene Woods.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

I got a cervine shrug in reply. “There is no telling if the message is for good or ill, only that I must receive it.”

Shaw patted Liam on the neck with his huge lion’s paw. “Thou hast no worries, then. Shouldst we perish, thy way is clear: Take

bloody vengeance for us!"

The princeling opened his mouth to object, and then thought better of it. Liam bowed once more before quietly leaving the room. I couldn't blame him in the slightest.

I snapped the attaché case closed. "Now that our post-death plans have been settled, let's go pay a visit to the dragon stables."

* * *

Up close, the South Keep looked like an unwieldy compromise between a firehouse and a hangar for jumbo jets. The side that faced away from the palace had three massive exits carved into the stone walls. On the opposite side, a less imposing entrance greeted me and my two friends. Sinuous dragon shapes, similar to the art I'd seen elsewhere in the palace, stretched over the doorway to emphasize the stables' purpose.

And yet, the doors stood open, no guard in sight, and no one greeted us as we walked inside.

Instead of stone, the inside of the building had the look of sun-scorched brick. Long hallways, wide spiraling staircases, and large rooms carved out of the cavernous interior greeted us, clean but bare of furnishings. But the place didn't feel abandoned, not quite.

Faint sounds came from up ahead. The scrape of chain on stone. The heavy slithering of something being dragged across a floor. The dull hint of a draconic roar.

We came to a stop in the largest room we'd yet seen. Multiple doorways punctured the walls. The open feel of the place made me think of the bullpen of desks and cubicles in the LAPD's main office area. A long wooden slab of a table ran half the length of the room, along with a dozen or so chairs. Shelves packed with clothing, armor, and assorted gear took up one whole wall. Names had been inscribed on brass plates above each shelf.

The opposite wall sported a gigantic pegboard and an equally large blackboard made of slate. Heavy iron keys dangled from each of the pegs, while the slate had been marked out with duty charts labeled 'Training Schedule', 'Flight Time', 'Maintenance' 'Parchmenting' and 'Stall Mucking'.

“Strange,” I remarked. “Did everyone take off early for lunch?”

Galen cupped a hand to his ear. “They are returning from their meal, then. I hear a person’s footsteps.”

“Nay,” Shaw corrected him, as he raised his head to listen. “Three men doth approach. One must be injured, as he drags one foot with a limp.”

I had to credit the accuracy of the griffin’s senses. No sooner had Grimshaw made his pronouncement than a trio of men walked through the far entryway. They each wore tunics of red and black, but that was where their similarity ended.

One was a swarthy man with a shock of wild, disheveled hair. He dragged one leg as he shuffled forward. Next to him strode a towheaded, gap-toothed youth who stared in astonishment at seeing us.

The tallest of the three had the build of a whippet and a black chin-strap beard fringing his lower jaw. His eyes flashed as he stepped forward, voice ringing with an overblown sense of self-importance.

“Who are you, and how have you come into this place?” he demanded. “For this is a redoubt for the dragon knights of the kingdom, and the squires who serve them!”

I traded a look with my two friends before answering.

“My name is Dayna Chrissie, and I’m here on the authority of Commander Yervan of the Palace Guard,” I said, keeping my voice even. “As for how we got here, we walked through your open front door.”

Shaw gave an irritated *snap* of his beak. “Shouldst this be a ‘redoubt’, then I am a mere fledgling. Thou didst not see fit to post guards at your entrance!”

“You may not know my companions,” Galen said coldly, “But as the Head Squire, I am sure that you have seen *me* at court.”

The tall man practically recoiled at the centaur’s rebuke. He bowed, motioning to his companions to follow suit. Clearing his throat, he spoke again in a more measured tone.

“Forgive me, Court Wizard. We were all surprised to see you arrive in the company of Grimshaw of the Air Cavalry, as well as a

rather comely companion."

I quirked my lips at that but kept silent as the man went on. It made sense that he'd know my two friends, at least. Galen was a fixture at the Royal Court, while Shaw had been with the griffin side of the Air Cavalry for years.

"I am Head Squire Rookhurst. This is Squire Dawley, and Squire Taneer." The gap-toothed youngster nodded first, followed by the disheveled, limping one. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Commander Yervan sent me to investigate the death of Sir Farroway," I said, as I took a step forward. "He wants answers from those who were present at the time."

"Well, we were present…" Dawley ventured. "But we didn't see anything much."

"We did have to do cleanup," Taneer grimaced. "At least as much as we were inclined to do at the time."

Rookhurst drew himself up. "Nevertheless, your arrival here is a surprise. I might expect Yervan to summon the Court Wizard. Or even a veteran mount from the griffins, I guess. But…sending a mere *girl* under his authority?"

I crossed my arms, mentally visualizing myself rolling my sleeves up.

"*Perhaps* you haven't been paying attention," I pointed out. "This 'girl' put Captain Vazura – your boss' boss – in the palace dungeon. Maybe you wish to share a cell with him?"

Taneer and Dawley blinked. Rookhurst swallowed, hard.

"I have no such desire," he admitted. "If the Commander of the Palace Guard sent you, my guess is that he finds the death suspicious."

"'Twould be a good guess," Shaw grumbled under his breath.

"Are there any others who work in the South Keep besides you three?" I asked Rookhurst.

"We are visited by various people who do the clothes washing, scullery work, smithing, meal serving, and the like," the man replied, though he still looked me over like a potential conquest rather than anyone of importance. "But we three are all that remain of the squires

here. Farroway was the last of the knights based out of this keep for now."

I digested that bit of news. Based on it, I decided to show one of my cards.

"Then you three need to know something," I declared. "I have found evidence of foul play involving Sir Farroway. We are not looking at an accident, but a murder."

The words hung there, filling the quiet between my friends and the three men.

Rookhurst, Dawley, and Taneer shared a couple of glances. As one, they shrugged.

"Oh, that," Taneer said simply. "It figures."

"Allow me to clarify something," Galen said quickly. "Are you three saying that you knew this was no accident? That some kind of treachery was involved?"

"We weren't sure," Dawley said. "But it does makes sense."

"It certainly does." Rookhurst snorted. "Sir Farroway had it coming. It was only a matter of time before someone took the man's life and cut it short."

Galen's hooves clattered on the stone floor, his eyes gone wide with astonishment. As for me, I held back a long-suffering sigh.

Just as with the Good King Benedict, my prime suspects already knew about the murder.

At least this time, I got that bit of news at the *start* of my investigation.

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Chapter Seven

It took some doing, but I was able to resist the temptation to rub my temples. I'd just take the headache if it came. Which it probably would, at this rate.

I had the three squires take seats across from us. I grabbed one as well to rest my weary feet. Galen stepped up to my right, while Shaw sat at my other side like a gold-furred mountain of muscle.

"All right," I said. "Let's start with the most pressing question. Why aren't any of you surprised at the news that Sir Farroway was murdered?"

Head Squire Rookhurst spoke first. "We were all sworn to service under that knight. While he was alive, it meant that our 'criticisms' about the man had to be tamped down."

Taneer snorted. "As with a dung shovel."

"But now that he's dead…" Rookhurst shrugged. "I suppose the best thing you could say for him was that he was a loyal follower of Captain Vazura."

Marvelous, I thought. *Now even* I'm *glad the man's dead.*

"But he was horrible to work for. He lorded over the fact that it was his word alone that would decide if we were worthy to become knights."

"Could you not appeal to Captain Vazura in such circumstances?" Galen asked.

"If Vazura was here, maybe!" Dawley declared, in his high-pitched voice. "But with all the dragons being transferred to the Reaches, he was never here. The Captain never heard how the man would beat us at a whim, with fist or club!"

Squire Taneer winced at the young man's words, pulling his leg a little closer before speaking in turn.

"Dawley has been here scarcely more than a year," he said. "But worst of all, Sir Farroway would keep many a squire on for years, with no intention of transitioning them to knights! I have been here for three years, and with no recognition from anyone!"

Now Rookhurst was the one who shifted uncomfortably.

"How long have you been a squire in Farroway's service?" I asked him. "As long as Taneer here?"

The Head Squire ran his fingers alongside the fringe of his beard before answering.

"Longer. There are several squires who were cut entirely at Farroway's whim, after spending years trying to enter the most fabled of the Air Cavalry's services."

Shaw gave a contemptuous snort at that but didn't interrupt.

"Yet you can see the man's mark all around you. We have no door guard, no live-in servants, and little beyond the clothes on our back. He made sure his gear was the best, and then gambled the rest of the money away. Of course, he tried to weasel out of paying when he lost." Rookhurst's voice sounded positively bitter as he added, "Worst of all, he had a habit of swiving other men's girlfriends and wives!"

I threw a puzzled look to Galen. "Swiving?"

"To carry off another's companion," he stated delicately. "For purposes of, ah, copulation."

"Fine," I said. "So we've established that Farroway was a piece of work. And that you three are only permanent staff here. What are your duties?"

"Our duties rotate based on the task schedule," Rookhurst said, nodding towards the board. "Squire Dawley, as the youngest, does most of the feeding and mucking duties. Squire Taneer is responsible for making sure everything in the Keep works properly."

"What doth that mean, exactly?" Shaw asked.

"If a door squeaks, I get it oiled," Taneer said, trying (and failing) to brush back his unruly hair. "If a stall needs new dragon restraint chains, I replace them. If anything else breaks, I fix it, or I call our Royal Smith."

"And what, predominantly, are your duties?" Galen asked Rookhurst.

The Head Squire preened a bit as the other two gave him dirty looks.

"Why, I handle the scheduling."

“That’s all well and good,” I said bluntly. “Because I need to know what each of you were assigned to do on the morning of the murder. Where you were. What you saw. Because that’s all that might keep you from a hangman’s noose.”

The three men looked shocked. Frankly, that surprised me. This was the first time they’d broken out of their shell of sullen anger or disinterest in the whole affair.

“You may be a comely one,” Rookhurst objected, “But this is insane!”

“Are you saying that *we’re* the suspects?” Dawley squeaked.

“You know anyone else who’d be better ones?” I asked, as I spread my hands. “If you do, then you better damn well speak up. Because each of you have both the means and the motive to do Sir Farroway in.”

“But…” Taneer goggled, “We didn’t murder anyone! We’re the victims here!”

“That remains to be seen,” Galen said evenly. “I suggest that you follow Lady Chrissie’s instructions to the letter. Otherwise, the consequences would be unseemly and tragic.”

Shaw backed up the centaur’s words with a threatening *snap* of his beak.

“Let’s start with whomever witnessed Sir Farroway’s death,” I began. But the three men each shook their heads. Incredulously, I pressed on. “Are you saying that none of you saw what happened to the victim?”

“I was busy raking out the stall of the dragon at the other end of the Main Flight Hall,” Dawley said quickly. “I came running when I heard the commotion, but all I saw was a lot of blood and Sir Farroway’s body.”

“And I arrived after Dawley,” Taneer stated. “I had to make my way down from above the upper parapet. Then I had to run the length of the Flight Hall. Dawley and I helped restrain Byzzurak – that was Farroway’s mount for the day – but the damage had already been done.”

“What were you doing up there?” I asked. “On the upper parapet,

I mean."

"Greasing the wheel used to open the door to Flight Hall's parapet." Somewhat defensively, he added, "You can see it noted on the task schedule board. It's been on the maintenance list for more than a week, it had to get done."

I cast a glance over towards the slate board. Names were just visible as chalk marks against the dark gray surface. Taneer's name had been scribbled under 'Maintenance' along with the letters 'GrsWhl' – probably for 'Grease Wheel'.

Dawley's name rested under 'Stall Mucking', followed by a cartoon of a puking man's face. Farroway was named under the categories of 'Training Schedule' and 'Flight Time' with the notation 'ByZ'. And Rookhurst's name had been chalked in under 'Parchmenting'.

"All right, we're down to you," I said, addressing Rookhurst. "What is 'Parchmenting'?"

Galen shifted his weight with a *clop* of his hooves. "I too would like to inquire about that term. Many hours have I spent perusing assorted texts, and I've never come across it."

"That was Sir Farroway's term," Rookhurst answered. "It was for anything involving the use of parchment. Handling invoices, sending out requests for money, reporting back to Good King Benedict…that's all it meant."

The Wizard chewed that over. "And what exactly were you 'parchmenting' about that fatal morning?"

"I was re-copying Sir Farroway's scrawl of a demand to the local butcher to supply us with an extra joint of meat for his dinners."

"Hmph," Shaw grunted. "'Tis the only useful demand this 'knight' ever made."

"Sir Farroway had drunk a bit too much the evening before. He'd shoved his scrawled note into my hands before retiring and told me to send it out first thing tomorrow morning."

"And did you?" I asked. "What is 'first thing in the morning' around here?"

The Head Squire looked at me strangely. "Dawn, of course."

"Of course," I agreed.

I had to mentally kick myself on that one. Andeluvia used time-keeping instruments of some sort, I knew that much. I'd heard bell towers chime out hourly increments across the city. But 'first thing in the morning' to someone in a pre-electricity society would obviously be 'when the sun rose'.

"So far as I know," Rookhurst said, "I was the first one who came here, to the duty room. I made myself a cup of breakfast tea and began the new message. Dawley and Taneer arrived only a few minutes later. They picked up their tools and left to go start their tasks for the day. Sir Farroway came in perhaps a quarter-hour or so after that. He was excited to be saddling Byzzurak, Eater of Bunnies."

"Eater of *what*?"

"Bunnies. When that dragon was a hatchling, that's what she liked to eat most. Also, it's a sort of joke amongst the squires. Byzzurak is easily the most vicious of the three mounts here. She's also the youngest, which is why she was being slated for a first flight under a veteran like Sir Farroway."

That made me sit up. "This dragon hadn't been ridden before?"

"Never ridden, barely tamed. He took out his training gear and left for the stable."

"Alone?"

"Sir Farroway always preferred to work solo on a dragon's first saddled flight. He said that there were fewer distractions that way."

And fewer witnesses, I thought. *How very convenient.*

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Chapter Eight

Head Squire Rookhurst's voice took on a more urgent tone as he continued.

"Suddenly, I heard shouting from down in the Flight Hall. I got up from my work at once. I thought perhaps Sir Farroway was having problems controlling his mount, though he'd never had difficulty before. As I made my way around to the rear stairwell, the shouts turned into dragon roars and human screams. By the time I arrived on the floor of the Hall, it was too late."

He paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and shuddered.

"Blood was everywhere. Everywhere! The dragon had already torn Farroway apart and was chewing into his innards. She had gone into a frenzy. If Dawley and Taneer hadn't shown up on my heels, I couldn't have gotten her under control again!"

Rookhurst fell silent for a moment and took a breath. I sat back to digest what he was telling me. Assuming that he was being truthful, his was the closest account to an eyewitness account of the event.

"We got the dragon placed into another stall," he said heavily. Taneer and Dawley also looked glum as he went on. "Then we sent a message to the palace guard. And did our best to clean up…what was left."

I waited a couple of moments, until the squire got himself under control.

"If I was in your shoes, I'd think this was a terrible accident. Why did you three suspect murder?"

Squire Taneer answered first this time. "Well…he deserved it!"

Dawley nodded emphatically. "No one has shed a tear over this knight's passing."

"Right, we're all in agreement there," I said, tamping down my frustration. "But did you find anything amiss? Anything out of place?"

Rookhurst shook his head. "We did a check of the gear after stabling Byzzurak. Nothing was broken or out of place for bridle, saddle, or restraints. The galingale was intact. The wingkey and

throatlatch chains weren't broken. Neither were the gullet irons, breechers, or cruppers."

I considered this for a moment. There was a lot of terminology here that I wasn't familiar with, and it might play into what happened. But at least there was something I could do to remedy that.

"Right," I said, as I grabbed my case and stood up. "I want to look at the crime scene, and I want to see this 'Eater of Bunnies'. Squire Rookhurst, I'd like you to accompany us, should we have questions to ask."

"Of course," he said, as he and his companions also got to their feet. "But due to the, ah, recent death, Squire Taneer hadn't finished greasing the wheel to open the door. I'll need to pull it open from the outside."

"That won't work alone," Taneer broke in. "I can turn the wheel from above while you do that. Dawley can fetch Byzzurak, she's been calm ever since the incident."

"Look, we can just take the rear stairs down to the Flight Hall," I pointed out. "You did, didn't you?"

Rookhurst nodded. "Yes, but it's a very narrow spiral staircase. I doubt that your centaur and griffin friends would be able to fit."

"Aye," Shaw agreed. "'Twouldst be easier on mine own wings."

"We are built rather differently," Galen said, as he gave me a meaningful look. "I would rather use the door they recommend."

With that, Rookhurst left the duty room by a narrow side passage while the other two squires returned the way they'd come. I took a few steps over to the wall that held the shelves of individual clothing and gear. Now that we were alone, I decided to make use of the time.

"So," I said, "what are your thoughts, guys?"

"'Tis much to mislike," Shaw rumbled quietly. "This place was ill-run, that is for sure. Little love exists for their liege or their duties. Also, 'tis a matter of how much truth they speak."

Galen swished his tail. "Agreed. I also cannot help but wonder what they are not telling us."

"Some of what they say is true," I said, as I picked up a couple of the items that had caught my attention. "For example, here's where a

lot of the money for the South Keep went."

Under the column labeled 'Sir Farroway' were shelves stocked with clothing and plates of armor. In one hand, I held up a gleaming shoulder plate. Then I pointed at a shimmering set of clothes made from red fabric shot through with metallic thread.

"Gold-plated armor, the kind for ceremonies," Galen observed. "And that fabric is *samite*. Silk interwoven with silver and golden threads. Quite expensive, as you might guess."

"Let's say that Farroway was as corrupt as these squires claim," I said, as I put the armor back on the shelf. "Then why did they remain? Either the young men here are desperate to become knights, or their liege had a hold on them in some other manner. You saw their reactions as Farroway's sins were discussed."

The Wizard nodded. "I did indeed. Rookhurst had a female friend swived. It also appears that Taneer was beaten so badly by Farroway that he was lamed."

"And Dawley's been stuck at the bottom rank ever since coming here." I murmured, as I came to stand before the slate task board. "His name is on the 'Stall Mucking' column almost every single day. But that's not what bothers me."

Shaw's lion tail flicked back and forth. "What makes thy brow furrow, then?"

"Look," I said, as I pointed at each column for yesterday. "Dawley's shoveling dragon poop as usual – but he said that he was at the farthest stall from the scene of the murder. Taneer is also far away, doing maintenance where he can't get to the scene quickly. And Rookhurst is up here, right when Taneer's work will keep him from arriving quickly. All on a day when Farroway has a hazardous duty to perform."

"It is terribly convenient," Galen admitted. "This schedule is out in the open. One of the three could have planned a murder knowing the other two wouldn't arrive in time to witness anything."

"Aye, one of the three," Shaw said, with a low caw. "Or, mayhap, *all* three of them."

"Mayhap," I agreed, using Shaw's term. "They didn't think much

of my showing up here."

"I shall not defend their attitudes," Galen said, with the raise of an eyebrow. "But that is the nature of this kingdom, Dayna. Among the griffins or centaurs, powerful and independent females are a given. Here in the human kingdom of Andeluvia, such a person is as rare as the sighting of a unicorn."

"Wait, you actually have unicorns in this world?" I asked.

"According to the bestiaries, yes."

"Well, I may be 'rare', but sometimes I wish I *was* a unicorn."

"Oh? Why is that?"

I gave him a wry look. "Because then I could just stab people I didn't like with my head."

The scrape of a door sounded from one of the side corridors. We heard a grunt as it opened a tiny crack. Rookhurst stuck his head through with difficulty.

"Just give us one more moment," he said. "The damned thing is stuck."

Galen and Shaw stayed at my side as I went to wait before the door. A couple of seconds passed, and then light flooded the dim passageway as the entryway creaked open with the scrape of metal on stone.

"Okay," I breathed. "Let's go look at our crime scene."

We stepped out onto a wide stone parapet. Like much the rest of the stables, it had the scorched-brick look of a well-used pizza oven. The view overlooked a cathedral-sized space, which had been subdivided into individual stalls. Running down the middle of the space from the stables to the open doors was the wide Main Flight Hall.

The freshness of the outside air that wafted in couldn't completely wash away the sulphurous scent of a volcanic vent. A multitude of iron chains suspended above and around the huge chamber made a tinny chorus of *clinks* in an especially strong breeze.

One set of chains tightened as the slack was picked up. A set of stall doors swung open on well-oiled hinges and out lumbered a blue-scaled nightmare. Legs tipped with quadruple sets of claws scraped

against the floor. They supported a creature that was part velociraptor, part snake, and all bad attitude. Cyan-sheened scales encased a twenty-foot long body. A lizard-like tail, leathery wings, and a pair of backwards-facing horns completed the picture.

So this was the cutely named ‘Byzzurak, Eater of Bunnies’.

“Quite the ferocious looking creature,” Galen observed.

“Pah!” Shaw scoffed. “‘Tis but a stripling, and an under-fed one, at that.”

Maybe Byzzurak was a stripling. But so far as I was concerned, any dragon over three feet long was only one thing.

Trouble.

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Chapter Nine

We descended the wide stairway down from the parapet towards the Flight Hall. Centaur hooves and griffin claw tips made loud *tics* that echoed across the vast space. At the base of the stairs a set of strange-looking weapons hung in an open wall case. Three were halberds that sported a hook-like end above the blade. I couldn't identify the other items.

I stepped past the case and onto the runway of the Main Flight Hall. It dredged up memories of when my parents took me to an air show and I'd first stepped into an aircraft hangar.

High above, the ceiling crawled with images of scaly beasts spreading their wings. Sleek columns of stone ran down from above, buttressing the outer walls. High arched windows let light in, framing detailed panels of stained glass.

The largest of these panels displayed a tree trunk spiraling upwards into a dragon's tail. The reptile itself perched atop a starburst accented sun. The light filtering through the windows made the picture glow with an unrestrained radiance.

Colored shafts of light illuminated the metal plates inset into the individual stall doors. Movement came from behind two of the nearby doors, as well as the *chuff* of something big turning about and settling in. The first read Duzzarrar, Of the Gentle Mind and Kydantus, The Adorable.

Well, those names did sort of track with Byzzurak, Eater of Bunnies.

The Head Squire came down the steps at a jog. Galen moved adroitly to one side so that the man wouldn't bump into the centaur's rear. Rookhurst joined us, chest heaving for a few moments before he spoke.

"Well, now. This is the Main Flight Hall, as you can see," he huffed. "Dragons are brought from their stables back here and led forward to the Launching Square."

I cast a glance about twenty yards back to where Dawley worked

with Byzurrak. The young squire held the beast by a heavy band of leather that ran along the creature's bright blue scaly neck. That didn't appear nearly enough to restrain her.

Additional leather bits and an iron chain attached to Byzzurak's body – undoubtedly the pieces of tack mentioned by Rookhurst – kept her in check. Squire Taneer appeared, limping over to stand next to Dawley. He patted Byzzurak's flank, speaking softly to keep her calm. A dull rumble issued from the dragon's chest in return.

"As you can see, the knights' mounts are always kept in top condition," Rookhurst stated proudly. "This one is young, and young dragons are always feisty."

"Must they always be restrained?" Galen asked.

"Only until they are broken in. Most of the bonds are for their safety as well as ours – so that claws are not chipped, or wings unfurled where they could be broken."

"Yon beasts might still breathe fire," Shaw rumbled. "Mine own nose scents this."

"It is a rare event," Rookhurst quickly reassured him. "Dragons won't bite or breathe fire unless they are properly wound up."

I chewed that over. "What might 'wind them up'?"

"The types of prods one might expect in any predatory animal. Unexpected pain. Hunger. And of course, the scent of blood."

"Well, I suppose that Byzzurak was well-fed yesterday. With Sir Farroway."

Rookhurst held back a snort with a bit of difficulty. "Actually, the dragons are fed each morning. Dawley arrived early enough that Byzzurak had time for her breakfast."

"Did you check to see that he performed his job?"

"A squire's word is as good as a knight's," came the proud reply. "But if only to put our minds at ease, we did check. The proper amount of feed had been taken out of the day's bin and put down the meal chute. And the trough at the bottom was clean, meaning that the dragon had eaten what was given."

"Interesting," Galen noted. "If we eliminate hunger as a motivator, that leaves pain and blood. Quite a charming set of alternatives."

“But they’re the most likely ones,” I said. “We know that Sir Farroway beat his human squires, even injuring them. He sounds like he’d do the same to his mount.”

Shaw *chuffed* angrily. “‘Tis unlikely a rider would survive a griffin’s wrath if he tried that with one!”

I gave my friend a quick rub atop his eagle head. “No doubt, big guy.”

“Sir Farroway was known to be…less than gentle with his mounts,” the Head Squire continued. “Perhaps he spurred or whipped Byzzurak into a frenzy. But it’s highly unlikely.”

“Why would that be?”

Rookhurst raised an eyebrow. “For two reasons. First, the man simply couldn’t reach Byzzurak’s head or tail with a crop while in the saddle. He was simply too short of limb.”

That got my attention. “Short of limb? You mean that this dragon knight was a short one.”

The Head Squire put his hand out at slightly below shoulder level. I guesstimated it at five-foot-three, if that. I traded a knowing glance with Galen.

He nodded. We’d seen the cuts on Farroway’s shoulders. Unfortunately, the man was shorter than any of the three squires. That meant any one of them could have rained blows down upon their diminutive liege lord.

“The second reason I doubt Sir Farroway goaded the dragon was due to the nature of the beast,” Rookhurst said. “One spurs on a mount to do something it does not want to do naturally. And all dragons want to fly.”

A thought occurred to me.

“Then that leaves the scent of blood. Let’s take a look at where you found Farroway’s body.”

The Head Squire nodded and led us a couple dozen paces further down the Flight Hall. We came out into an area that was wide enough for dragons to fully unfurl their wings. The light was stronger here, closer to the triple set of open hangar doors. Rookhurst pointed to stains on both wall and floor before a dull grumble of a roar echoed

along the hall.

"Excuse me," he said. "Byzzurak is being feisty."

The Head Squire took off at a jog to help Taneer and Dawley keep the bright blue dragon in check. I turned my attention to the splatter marks where Sir Farroway met his end. The floor was a complete loss, forensically speaking. What vague signs were left had been mopped into oblivion.

But the wall was a different matter. The gore had been removed, but what was left had coagulated enough for me to make out a distinct pattern. The second-largest splotch in this section was a roughly horizontally oriented rectangle, punctuated with thicker marks down its length.

I knelt, opened my case, and took out a trio of items. I pushed a spongy turquoise slab into Galen's hand while I unwrapped my two other bundles.

"Galen, would you mind kneading that in your hands until it's soft and pliable?"

"Surely," he replied, as Shaw leaned in and took a curious sniff. The Wizard began churning the substance in his hands before looking up. "Would this be potter's clay?"

"Actually, it's 'stick-tack'. We're going old school forensics today." I held up the other two items. One was a silver square with a 'tongue' sticking out. The other was an orange mass wrapped around a cone-shaped spindle. "Sticky stuff, a tape measure, and some string."

While Galen diligently kneaded away, I leaned in closer to the bloodstain, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply. The faint iron scent of dried blood tickled my nose and tongue, but I wanted a second opinion.

And it just so happened that I had a nose available which was even better than my own.

Or 'mine own' as the possessor of that nose would have said.

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Chapter Ten

"Shaw," I said, "I could use your help."

The big griffin lumbered over. "What might I do for thee?"

"Stand over here and give this area a good sniff," I said, as the griffin's stern eagle's face appeared next to me. "Do you smell anything aside from spilled human blood?"

Grimshaw raised his head slightly as he breathed in. Air whistled through his nares, the pair of slit-like nostrils on his upper beak. He shook his head, ruffling his head feathers as he did so.

"Mine own senses detect human blood, that much is sure. 'Tis a pittance of fresh sulfur mixed with a strike of dragon fire. From over there."

I followed Shaw's raised forepaw over to the largest stain on the wall, which was about five feet to the left. This shape wasn't so much a 'mark' as a 'smear'. The color was darker there, as if the blood had been mixed with stomach bile and other fluids.

"Yeah. We'll have to come to that in a bit."

"I have your sticky clay," Galen announced, as he handed me the warm, tacky mass. "I fail to see the use of this substance."

"Watch and learn." Smiling, I went to work.

Blood spatter analysis was something of an art. But where some people couldn't do it without laser pointers, I was ready to go low-tech. I began by using the tape measure to plot out distances and jot down the numbers in my mind.

Next, dabs of stick-tack went on the wall where the spatters terminated. They branched out into plotted trajectories with each length of string and yet more dabs of stick-tack. And in time, they told me a story. I repacked my case before stepping back to explain the sequence of events to both my griffin and wizard friends.

"I'm going to operate under one assumption," I began. "That Byzzurak had to be goaded into attacking. Most likely by the scent of blood. If so, it stands to reason that someone wounded or killed Sir Farroway first, and then tried to cover it up by playing it off as a

dragon attack."

"That goal would have been achieved," Galen said. "Had it not been for your skill in forensics magic, of course."

"So our murderer waits for the other squires to be about their morning tasks. He waits for Sir Farroway to gear up and bring Byzzurak down to this part of the Main Flight Hall, ready to take off. Then, he comes out and confronts Farroway right before the man has time to mount his dragon."

"Thou dost not think it was an attack from ambush?" Shaw asked.

"Probably not. When Galen and I viewed the body, we found a defensive wound on Farroway's dominant hand. A cut on the palm from a downward slash. If he'd been ambushed, we wouldn't have seen any defensive wounds at all."

The griffin nodded, and I continued my demonstration. Standing, I faced the wall from six feet away, raising my hands as if to bring down an overhead chop. Then I brought my arms down, three or four times. I continued my explanation as I did so. Shaw looked thoughtful while the Wizard rubbed his chin, considering my words.

"The murderer, who is armed with a sword or some other sharp weapon, gives Farroway three or four hacks at this point. I see some unconnected spots that landed far below the main stain on the wall, the terminus of a splatter from at least this distance."

I then stepped to one side. I kept on speaking, pointing and moving my index finger along the string lines held with stick-tack.

"Now badly wounded, Farroway stumbles backward and hits the wall. That's where this stain comes from, four and a half feet from the floor. It's roughly where the top of a man's shoulder would be if they were around five-foot-three. Only, the attacker's not done with him yet. Notice the thicker parts of the splotch? I'm thinking they're from additional wounds as Farroway takes more blows.

"The strings leading there tell me that the blood droplets from these additional hits made a fairly high arc, as those splatters look like elongated teardrops. It's not a flat droplet, but it's not a straight, band shape either. This tells me the blood flew from the wound at moderate speed. Fast enough for a sword strike, too slow for the impact of

something like a bullet."

"But what about the larger stain to the left?" Galen finally asked.

I grimaced. "That's when the dragon got in on the action. The stain is ragged, and there are other bodily fluids mixed in. That's indicative of organ failure and rupture. And, of course, of a dragon's saw teeth cutting through and removing flesh and viscera.

"I don't see a connecting pattern of droplets or smears between the two stains. So, either Farroway was still on his feet, or the murderer grabbed him and shoved him over there. The blood scent triggered Byzzurak's instincts, and she finished him off. Or maybe just finished the leftovers."

The Wizard clopped one forehoof. "As always, I am amazed. You have explained the unexplainable yet again."

I shook my head sadly. "No, I haven't. Someone cut Farroway to pieces. Then, they must have released Byzzurak from part of her restraining harness to let her attack and eat the hapless knight. And nothing in this sequence of events helps us winnow down our list of suspects."

"Perhaps. And yet, I cannot help but feel it keeps the list narrow. Whoever murdered Farroway not only knew him, they knew what parts of a dragon's harness to unlock."

I nodded, pausing for a moment as a fresh breeze picked up. It tousled my hair, forcing me to brush it away from my face.

"It's a stretch," I said, "but it might be worth looking at the mounting tack they use here. Then I want to check each of the bladed weapons–"

A shout echoed from down the Flight Hall. I turned to see the three squires struggling to hold Byzzurak in check. The dragon let out the first real roar I'd heard since arriving here. The guttural sound echoed from the stalls housing Duzzarrar and Kydantus. Chains rustled and bangs came from behind locked doors.

"That doesn't sound good," I said, as the young dragon rose up, ignoring the shouts and pleas of her trainers. "What is setting her off?"

"'Tis the scent of the blood!" Shaw hissed.

It hit me like a thunderclap. The breeze had carried the scent

down towards the dragon. Now, she wanted to follow that trace right back to the source. Right back to us.

A metallic *snap* cracked through the air like a rifle's report.

Byzzurak raised one clawed foreleg to tear the leather strap binding her muzzle free. The squires gave up on the positive talk and ran to the nearby wall, where there was yet another open case of weapons. Taneer and Dawley each grabbed one of the halberds. Rookhurst picked up a long-handled device with a loop of iron chain around one end. But none of the three were fast enough to keep up with the young dragon.

With the ground-shaking momentum of an eighteen-wheeler, Byzzurak began to move. Her wings still bound by leather straps, she charged forward, her claws flexing like harrow blades. Her blue scales glinted in the light cast from the stained-glass windows.

She was all beauty and terror in one sinuous package as she charged.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Eleven

A blast of air blew my hair to one side as Shaw took off with an explosive downbeat of his wings. Galen reached into a pocket and dug out a handful of fine blue powder. He flung up one arm with a cry as he tossed the dust. My nostrils filled with the same cinnamon-maple scent as the time he'd used this spell in the Grove of the Willows.

The sizzle of raw meat thrown into a hot pan *crackled* through the air. A wall of flame leapt up before us. Byzzurak skidded to a halt, rearing and lashing out with her foreclaws. She snorted like a horse, as if to say: *Now you've got my dander up.*

Shaw dove down from above with a screech. The dragon turned its head to meet the new threat even as she made an ungracious sound like a belch. My gut churned, as I knew what was coming next.

"Get on my back!" Galen urged.

I ignored the extended hand even as the flames from the Wizard's barrier vanished with a *whoosh.* The dragon's coming fiery breath wasn't aimed at us. But I wasn't going to let Grimshaw get toasted either.

My practice at the firing range paid off as I reached for my firearm, pulling it from the holster in one smooth motion. I wasn't a great shot yet, but the dragon was a decent-sized target. I took aim at her head and squeezed the trigger.

The shot thundered in the cathedral-like space. I missed the Byzzurak's eye. The bullet sparked as it knocked out one of her giant saw-blade teeth. The impact jerked her head to one side as a gout of flame erupted from her maw.

Shaw swerved in midair, avoiding the dragon's fireball. It impacted with a *boom* against the ceiling high above. Extending his wings to slow his descent, he slashed out with his leonine forepaws. Lightning fast slashes of griffin claws and *cracks* of Shaw's furred backhand against Byzzurak's skull echoed off the walls.

The young dragon moaned as she fell to the ground with a massive crunch. Byzzurak's eyes rolled up as her lids came down. A

thin trickle of acidic blood dripped from the creature's mouth.

Shaw landed nearby, his feathers fluffed and fur bristled in barely-leashed aggression.

He let out a lion's growl. "And thou hadst best *stay* down!"

Sparks and soot drifted down from the scorched ceiling as the three squires scrambled past us to their dragon charge. Dawley looked ready to cry. Taneer pressed his ear against the dragon's chest. Once he heard the dragon's slow, steady heartbeat, he nodded to Rookhurst. The Head Squire let out a sigh of relief.

Great. Nice to know that no one *important* had been hurt.

"Are either of you two injured in any way?" Galen asked me and Shaw.

I shook my head. "I'm fine."

"As am I," Shaw said, as I put my hand up to smooth his fur down. "Methinks that turn of events was due to your actions, Dayna."

I grinned as I holstered my gun. "I don't want to see you injured either, big guy."

The griffin absently scratched a claw against the floor. "'Twas good fun. Long has it been since I have had leave to fight a dragon. Perhaps mine own luck shall run true and this one shall get back up for another round."

"I think not!" Rookhurst flared. "Dragons are valuable and expensive creatures! This accident could have sent our heads to the chopping block!"

"This *accident* could have ended up with my head chomped off by your charge," I shot back. "This was an awfully well timed 'accident'."

Dawley and Taneer looked up from where they were busy wrapping a new steel chain about Byzzurak's tail. But while they seemed startled at my words, I didn't see any dark looks of guilt.

"What are you saying?" Taneer breathed.

"I'm saying that I want you to put Byzzurak in a different stall," I declared, as I fought to keep my voice from shaking. "I want to look at where you normally keep her. I want to look at each and every blade you've got in this keep. And I *damn* sure want to look at the chain that snapped."

Rookhurst seemed ready to argue the point. Then he caught the looks of the centaur and griffin accompanying me. He thought better of it and simply nodded.

"As soon as we have Byzzurak in an alternate stall, I'll bring down every blade we have."

He turned and began snapping orders to the two other squires. I spotted a dangling length of chain back where the dragon had started her blood-fueled charge. It sparkled on the floor like the shed skin of a giant snake.

"Shaw, I'm going to need your strength again right now. Would you be willing to help these men drag Byzzurak into wherever they plan to keep her? Then, I need those keen eagle eyes to inspect the blades they bring out. We need to find any with a chip from the edge."

"It shall be done," the griffin said, and he went off to assist the squires.

"Galen, I'm wondering if the murderer left any blood traces behind when he left. Our squires here mopped up the floor nice and clean. But maybe you could check the passageways that lead from the Main Flight Hall?"

"I shall endeavor to find what I may," the Wizard said, with a little bow. "What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Me?" I chewed my lip. "I'm going to look at Byzzurak's stall."

The centaur nodded before heading over to the nearest entryway with a clip-clop of his hooves. I picked up my case and turned in the opposite direction. It was a long walk down the length of the Flight Hall. A dull *boom* sounded as Byzzurak was shut into one of the side stables. The three squires headed back up along the stairway from the parapet, with Shaw following behind.

Finally, I made my way up to Byzzurak's original stall. The doorway had been marked with the dragon's name on a plate of brass. Someone had carved the silhouette of a bunny, complete with whiskers, into the softer wood below the plate.

I looked up and down the Flight Hall. No one was around. Good.

Now I could take care of what I really needed to do.

In private.

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Chapter Twelve

I put my head against the wood next to the bunny carving and dry heaved a couple of times. Then I exhaled, hard. Forced my stomach to sit back and *shut up*.

My recent experiences were slowly toughening me up. Back when I'd been shot at with a sniper rifle, I'd held everything together until I got home. Then I'd spent the rest of the evening as an emotional wreck held together by hot showers and a quart of Chunky Chocolate Coma ice cream.

That wasn't going to cut it in Andeluvia.

There was more on the line now for me. More than simply proving that Dayna Chrissie was even more hard-boiled than the bad boys at the Los Angeles Police Department. Friends of mine from completely different species looked up to me now. Counted on me. And come the crunch time, I'd pulled the gun out and used it right.

One more thought stiffened my spine.

There was one more thing Byzzurak's rampage had in common with the sniper attack. The very thing that had struck home with me, launching me into this amazing journey into a world of magic. The fact that it had been a deliberate attempt to murder someone. And not just anyone, mind you.

It was an attempt to kill me. That invested me in this case even more. Murder attempts focused the mind like nothing else.

With that, I stood up and forced my mind back to business.

I took a second look at the door to Byzzurak's stall. It had well-oiled hinges and a properly fitting latch. Out of curiosity, I gave the door a push. It swung inwards easily without so much as a squeak.

"Well maintained," I said to myself, as I walked into the stall itself.

Dawley had done his mucking job well. All that greeted me was a dimly lit chamber within. The air tingled with an acrid hint of sulfur.

I walked over to a metal grate set into the wall. The grate wasn't set flush. Instead, it had tracks that allowed it to slide upwards. Below

the grate was a spotless metal feed trough.

That had to be the chute by which the dragon was fed. I stood on my tiptoes, but I couldn't quite reach the mechanism by which the chute was opened. But I did smell something odd as I did so. At first, I thought it was the dusty scent of burlap. But then I picked up notes of grass, grain, and gone-off vegetables. I closed my eyes and visualized a well-kept compost heap.

"Dayna," Galen called. The centaur trotted back over to me, shaking his head as he did so. "I'm not sure that I can contribute anything useful. The side passages have also been mopped clean for the most part. I did find a spattering of dried blood along one that leads out of the keep and down into the city proper, but that was it."

"We'll follow up on that," I promised, and then indicated the grate in front of me. "Can you help me lift this?"

"The opening to the dragon's feed chute? Certainly."

The Wizard stepped in, grasping the edge of the grate. His arm muscles flexed, and then he frowned.

"Odd," he remarked. "It does not appear to be well oiled."

I looked back at the door, thinking of how well maintained it was. It didn't add up. Not yet. The Wizard squinted before plucking something from the side of the grate.

"Ah, there we go," Galen said. "Something was jamming it."

I danced a step back as the centaur lifted the grate. Green and brown pellets cascaded out of the chute to pelt my legs and land in the bowl. The Wizard's breath whistled out as we realized what this meant.

Footsteps and the *clink* of chain announced Shaw's return, along with the three squires. The griffin looked grim as he carried in a two-foot long set of links in one forepaw. The squires didn't look all that happy either, for that matter.

"All halberds in this keep are whole," Shaw stated. "However, this restraint chain is not. The edges of one link are shattered. Mine own eyes cannot tell if it failed though age, or by the sharp blow of a weapon."

"Then I'll have to start looking for signs of sabotage," I said

bluntly. “Because I’m seeing something similar here. Byzzurak’s food chute has been jammed, possibly for the last two days.”

“Which would explain why the dragon *ate* Sir Farroway,” Galen added, “instead of simply *killing* him. It would also provide reason for her to charge us upon picking up the spoor of dried blood. Hunger provides an uncommon focus for a creature such as she.”

Rookhurst flushed with anger. “Dawley, you’re in charge of feeding and mucking! Explain yourself!”

The young man goggled in fear. “But I didn’t…I swear, I fed her–”

“Hold on!” I shouted, as Taneer moved to grab his fellow squire by the collar. “Anyone with a working knowledge of this stable could have done this. There are still too many possibilities.”

Squire Dawley gulped, remaining silent as I continued.

“Shaw, you inspected all the halberds here. What about the other blades?”

“‘Twere no more blades in this keep,” the griffin replied. “Or so I was told.”

“There aren’t any,” Rookhurst said. “Squires are forbidden from dueling. Only Sir Farroway carried a blade. We’re not even allowed to use knives to cut the food brought to us!”

I cursed under my breath. This was what I was worried about. That the trail to find the murder weapon might take us outside the South Keep.

“Your halberds and door locks are well kept up, that much is for sure,” Galen ventured. “Yet why would Byzzurak’s chain fail, if that were so?”

Squire Taneer answered. “I have no idea. If a chain ever seemed in danger of failing, I’d have brought it to our Royal Smith.”

“Who might that be?”

“Each dragon keep retains the services of a Royal Smith. It keeps our costs down, and our needs supplied. The one we use is just inside the city, one street down from us.”

“Dayna, the passage where I found the dried smear of blood could lead in that direction,” Galen put in. “In your parlance, this might be a ‘lead’ worth following up.”

“Yes, it looks like we’ve got someplace new to check out. Let’s go.”

The Wizard coughed into his hand. “One hates to throw water on a crackling hearth, but I believe that you have an appointment to keep back in your world.”

That stopped me in my tracks. I’d almost forgotten my afternoon counseling session. Which, at this one inopportune moment, ranked as important as this murder case.

A sigh escaped my lips.

“Care to guess what I’m wishing for right now?” I asked.

Galen considered. “Would you be wishing that you were a unicorn?”

“Got it in one.”

“Aye,” Shaw agreed. “Stabbing foes with thy head is a most useful idea.”

“Socially tricky, though,” I said, as I pulled out my medallion. “We’ll pick this up as soon as I return.”

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Chapter Thirteen

Councilor Vickie Lewellyn made me realize something at our next afternoon session.

I realized that I had to update my list of *Things That Drive Dayna Chrissie out of Her Effing Mind*. Patent sure as heck pending.

That list of things would now include lavender, cinnamon, and rubber bands.

As soon as I arrived back in Los Angeles and got over the usual dizziness with a side order of nausea, I went to check the weather. No rain in the forecast, which was good. But the unseasonable humidity was going to hang around like an unwanted houseguest for a little longer.

I didn't chance the traffic this time. A quick rinse off and a change of clothes and I was out the door. Thanks to the whims of the traffic gods, this time I arrived at the turnoff for the OME a full forty minutes early. I went around the corner and parked at a postage stamp sized Armenian takeout restaurant I'd discovered.

The place had great food, a ceiling that threatened to collapse any minute, and a grand total of two seats. Both seats were taken by a pair of wizened, cigarette smoking men in the middle of a decade long chess match. I picked up my Styrofoam box of fragrant chicken kebab with a side of tabbouleh and gobbled it in the car.

One more quick drive-and-park at the OME later left me with a few more minutes. So once I got through the security checkpoint, I went into the first women's restroom to rinse out my mouth. Tabbouleh salad was fantastic, but the minced parsley could fleck my smile with red and green flakes.

I finished my visit to the restroom with a hastily popped breath mint and headed down to the Human Resources section. I was well ballasted and ready for anything. Or so I hoped.

The first thing that greeted me upon entering the Counselor's office was a brand-new poster that hung to the right of Lewellyn's leather office chair. The 'What you say in here' display had been

replaced with the picture of a grumpy looking tuxedo kitten. Above the kitten floated a thought bubble in a comic book font enthusing: *Let's take the GRRR!!! out of ANGER!!!*

It was cute, but the second thing that greeted me in that office was a twin blast of lavender and cinnamon. Separately, and in moderation, these smelled nice. But the lavender smothered my sinuses in soft waves of purple scent, which were then lit on fire by the sharpness of the cinnamon.

I coughed once or twice. Then I held my hand up to my mouth to stifle any more to come. Lewellyn's desk still had a box of tissues on it, so I grabbed one to dab at the tears that threatened to form at the corner of my eyes. Just then, the counselor appeared from an adjoining room to take a seat behind her desk.

"I thought I heard a familiar-sounding sniffle out here!" she said, a giggle popping out from behind her cold neon sign smile. Then she frowned in concern. "Oh, no – are you coming down with a cold? I have some peppermint oil you might want to inhale."

"No, thank you!" I said quickly, as I took my seat opposite hers. I waved my hand across my nose as if to clear away the noxious vapors. "I'm allergic to extremely heavy odors. Could we please air the room out?"

Lewellyn's face flashed with annoyance. The expression vanished so quickly that I'd almost missed it. But I wasn't retracting my request. I wasn't 'allergic' per se, but my nose was a sensitive instrument that I used on the job. It wasn't reacting well at all to being smothered in a vat of perfumes.

"Well, if you wish," the Counselor said, putting away an array of scented reed diffusers that spread across a side table like the fronds of a strange underwater plant. "But you should be aware that aromatherapy is a useful part of the calming process."

I struggled to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Good to know. Now that those scents are gone, I do feel calmer."

If the Counsellor heard that shot, she didn't show it. Instead, she leaned down further to pull something new from a drawer. Lewellyn returned to her seat with the object pinched between her fingers.

Whatever it was, it dangled floppily like it was dead.

"Where is your stress ball?" she asked.

I had to rack my brain for a moment. I'd squeezed the silly thing a couple of times before leaving it on my desk. Then I'd completely forgotten about it.

"Um…I stopped by my office to pick up something. I must have left it there."

"You really need to take it home with you." Lewellyn scowled. "Or is your life so stress-free that you never get angry?"

I thought about the three squires and the 'accident' with Byzzurak that almost got me killed.

"Yeah…" I said. "I'll pick it up before I leave today."

"Take this too." The Counsellor leaned across the desk and dropped something in my palm.

I held it up. It was a loop of thin material the color of gone-off deli mustard. I squinted at the thing and could just make out the phrase *SNAP OUT OF IT!* along its edge.

"What do I need a rubber band for?"

"Put it around your wrist," Lewellyn instructed me. She helpfully pantomimed the movements just in case I couldn't figure it out. "It's to help stop your frustrations from getting out of control."

"I don't get it." Still, I complied by slipping the thing around my left wrist.

"I want you to wear this for the next couple of days," she explained, and that neon smile winked back on. "Let's try it out, shall we?"

"Oh, I'm sure we shall," I grumbled under my breath.

"Think about a time recently when you were frustrated about something. Something that led to you getting angry."

I bit my lip.

"Is there a problem?" Lewellyn asked.

"I'm having trouble picking one," I admitted. "There's more than a few times to choose from."

That was an understatement. Between dealing with Bob McClatchy and everything in Andeluvia, I had a whole smorgasbord to

select from. However, the Counselor brushed it off with a wave of her hand.

"Just visualize a person that you have issues with. Close your eyes. Make it a specific vision, and then bring in the sounds, the words that made you frustrated."

I closed my eyes and did as told. Immediately, I thought of Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy. In my vision, he wore a gray pinstriped suit that tented his broad frame. The one which made him look like a shark who'd been passing up swimmers and eating entire doughnut shops.

The sights and smells of the morgue downstairs fleshed out the picture. Then, his gruff voice completed it. I felt my heartbeat jump a notch and my fingers contract as I listened to his words.

I don't care if you're a damned private contractor! I've got three whole squads dedicated to finding you, and here you are at work!

"All right," came Lewellyn's voice. "As soon as you feel that first flush of anger or frustration, I want you to snap the rubber band against your wrist while you think to yourself, 'Snap out of it!'"

I reached over with my right hand and twanged the band against my skin. It stung. A quick 'snap out of it'! and I opened my eyes. It surprised me.

"That's not bad," I grudgingly agreed.

If anything, the neon smile got even brighter.

"You see, I knew we could help you," she said. "We just needed something to break your thought pattern. Close your eyes again and visualize a peaceful scene. Say, one where you're relaxing by a stream. That's your reward for stopping the negativity."

I closed my eyes again. In my mind, I reclined in a hammock hung between two tall poplar trees. A sinuous, slow moving stream flowed nearby, its water glistening under the shade of a grove of weeping willows.

Robert McClatchy had been bound with lengths of rope to the trunk of the nearest weeping willow. He was red-faced with exertion. But no sound escaped the duct-tape gag someone had thoughtfully planted across his entire mouth.

I smiled. This *was* peaceful.

"From now on," the Counsellor instructed, "when anything starts frustrating you, you don't need to close your eyes. Just snap the band to 'snap' out of it."

I opened my eyes and nodded. "Sounds good."

"Well, then! What have we learned today?"

The words slipped out before I caught myself.

"I learned that duct tape is a great way to keep annoying people quiet."

Dammit!

Lewellyn's neon smile winked out.

"Dayna," she said in a chilly voice, "with comments like that, I can't help but think you're not taking this seriously. And this is serious."

I tried to protest, but she held up a warning index finger. I kept quiet as she went on.

"We have one last meeting, two days from now. If I don't feel that you've come up with a strategy to counter your issues, then I can't sign off on your progress. No progress means no recommendation that you be taken off suspension. That means your employment here will be terminated. Immediately. Is that clear enough?"

I nodded wearily and got up to leave.

It took the remaining shreds of my willpower to wait until I closed the Counsellor's office door behind me. Then I began snapping the rubber band against my wrist as I headed up to my office to retrieve my stress ball. The little pricks of pain against my wrist didn't do a heck of a lot to improve my mood as I did so.

Just another happy day in the life of Dayna Chrissie.

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Chapter Fourteen

Heavy gray morning fog greeted me when I returned to Andeluvia. So did a centaur wizard and griffin warrior, which was a welcome treat after yesterday's aggravations. Galen quickly filled me in on the extra information he'd collected while I'd been busy inhaling lavender and cinnamon fumes.

"The Royal Smithy that handles repair requests for the South Keep lies practically around the corner," the Wizard stated. "I've already sent ahead for an audience with the senior smith who runs the facility, a man by the name of Flynn Cooper."

"I don't see any reason to delay that meeting," I said. "You lead, I'll follow."

"It is a short walk, but perhaps I could relieve you of some of your burden for the day?" Galen turned, presenting his flank to me. I reached up, unbuckled one of his saddle bags, and slid my attaché case inside.

I noticed Shaw taking extra care to smooth out his plumage. I did a double-take as I noticed that it was all very recent growth on the injured wing.

"Shaw, did your feathers all grow back overnight?" I asked, amazed.

"'Twas mostly the efforts of the Wizard's healing magic," he replied. "I owe him much thanks for restoring my flight."

"The thanks come from me too," I said. Galen simply nodded, pleased.

"What doth thou hold in thy other hand, Dayna?" Shaw asked. "The blue-seeming ball."

I held up the stress ball I'd gotten from Lewellyn. I'd remembered to retrieve it from my office. And then, as if in exchange, I'd accidentally left my jacket up there.

"This? It's supposed to…well, I guess it's supposed to make you feel better when you squeeze it."

"Might I try it?"

I handed it over as Galen caught sight of the yellow rubber band on my left wrist.

"Oh, and this is for something similar," I explained. "If I get aggravated, I'm supposed to snap it against my wrist."

"Indeed," Galen observed gravely. "If it can indeed alter one's mood, I should like to examine that bracelet in my laboratory. Perhaps I can tease out its magical properties."

I was about to answer that when the griffin placed the stress ball in his lion's paw and began to squeeze it with abandon. The little rubber sphere made a couple pathetic *squeak-squeaks* before it popped with a *fuh-TIZZ*!

"'Tis very effective," Shaw enthused. "I doth feel much better!"

"Come on, let's go," I said, with the shake of my head and a single snap of my bracelet.

The Wizard led the way at a clip-clop down a cobblestone road that curved alongside the base of the keep. Even through the fog, I made out the orange glow of fire through a set of slit windows and sooty smoke from a tall brick chimney. The breeze carried the smell of ash and hot iron up to us.

The Royal Smithy was a large enough place, complete with a gate at the rear to allow wagonloads of goods to arrive and depart. We went around to the front, where a dark green sign in the shape of an anvil hung above a door painted the same color. In fact, the tapestries and shields mounted on the walls of the antechamber inside were the exact same shade.

"They're not much for trying out different colors," I noted, as a servant went to fetch the smith. "Maybe they save money on paint that way."

"This shade of moss green holds a great deal of significance," Galen pointed out. "At the foundation of this kingdom, King Julian the Conqueror designated this one particular color to signify the Guild of the Royal Smiths. You shall not see it on anything that is unrelated to them."

Shaw nodded in agreement. "'Twas quite the honor for me to wear armor made by these men. Their craft is unmatched in difficulty."

“Really?” I asked. “And why is that?”

“Oh, that’s an easy answer,” came a jovial-sounding male voice. “Have you ever tried to get a griffin to sit still long enough to do a proper armor fitting?”

The man who’d answered me was tall, apple-cheeked, and wide-shouldered. In fact, his shoulders and upper arms were so massive that his frame made a perfect ‘T’ shape. His woolen tunic was dyed to match the furnishings. So were his elbow-length work gloves, though these were also heavily marked with soot. A golden brooch in the shape of two crossed hammers adorned the tunic high up on his wide chest.

“I never would have thought of that,” I said, as I extended my hand. “My name is Dayna Chrissie, and I’m here to–”

“Oh, I’m well aware of who each of you are. The Court Wizard sent a messenger to interrupt me at my dinner last night.”

The man removed his gloves and took my hand. His grip was warm and strong. The skin along the back of his hands were deeply tanned, with a jagged scar along the right and a white mark at the base of one finger on the left.

“Sorry to hear about your dinner.”

“No need to be sorry. It wasn’t a very good one, so it was little loss.” Light blue eyes crinkled as he smiled and bowed his head for a second. “Flynn Cooper, at your service.”

Galen rubbed his chin in thought. “Your family name is an interesting one for a ‘smith’. Aren’t ‘coopers’ in the business of making casks and barrels?”

“You are correct, Wizard. My kin are all involved with that trade.” Cooper ran his fingers through a badly receding hairline as he added, “I suppose I was the black sheep of our flock.”

I chuckled at that. Interesting to see that my world and this one shared the same idiom when it came to describing the ‘odd man out’ of a group.

“Still, I can see why you’re a select guild,” I said. “If fitting a griffin is troublesome, I can only imagine what it would be like to make something for a dragon rider’s mount.”

“It’s a job for someone with lots of patience,” he agreed. “And of course, anything involving dragons means a willingness to put one’s life at risk. That’s why we’re one of the few guilds that receive a royal pension after two decades of service. We damn well earn it!”

“I don’t doubt that for a second. I take it that you’re aware of what happened to Sir Farroway?”

A pained look crossed the big man’s face. “Aye, surely. I wouldn’t call him a virtuous knight, but it’s a shame he’s gone.”

Galen, Shaw and I exchanged surprised looks.

“Really?” I asked. “You seem to be in the minority. About regretting his death.”

“What can I say? He was a skinflint in all but two areas: his armor, and his dragon mounts. That meant he was my best customer!”

My mind flashed back to Farroway’s gold-plated armor back at the South Keep. The gleam of the plates, the shimmer of the samite clothing. What Cooper said made sense.

“Are you aware of why I am here? To inquire into the nature of the man’s death?”

He nodded. “I may only be a man who swings a hammer to earn his coin. Yet I know the crown would not send a young woman to a smithy without good reason. Especially in the company of a veteran griffin and the Court Wizard.”

“Well, I need to ask you some questions about the operations of your shop,” I said bluntly. “And you, now that I mention it.”

Cooper’s shoulders lifted in a massive rumple that I realized was a shrug.

“I don’t mind, Lady Chrissie. So long as you follow me around back to the shop. There’s work that needs to be done.”

“Will my friends be able to follow us?”

He paused before rumbling out a laugh. “Don’t see why not. All the passages and rooms here were made wide enough to move dragon-sized armor plates about. But come along and we’ll see. If one of them gets stuck, I’ll send a servant boy to find some goose grease to free them!”

With that, he turned and led the way down a long corridor

leading towards the rear of the building. Shaw snorted, but followed along in our wake. Galen brought up the rear. The Wizard had to duck, but my friends were able to make their way along easily enough.

"How many smiths do you have working for you?" I began, as I worked to keep up with the man's fast, lumbering pace. "I hear that your smithy makes or repairs pretty much anything at the South Keep."

"At present, I have three smiths that work with me. But as far as making or repairing anything in the South Keep, I'm the one you need to talk to."

"Why is that? I mean, if there are three others, shouldn't I speak to them as well?"

"I'm not the only one who works with metal here," the big man allowed. He jabbed a thumb towards his chest as he continued to speak. "Yet Sir Farroway depended on only one person to complete any work needed and to deliver it to the Keep. And that one person would be *me*."

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Chapter Fifteen

Flynn Cooper had just given me an interesting tidbit of information.

Sir Farroway depended on only one person to complete any work needed and to deliver it to the Keep. And that would be me.

I paused for a moment as we emerged from the passage and entered a wide triple set of rooms at the back of the smithy. The smell of hot iron and ash tickled my nose, but I forced myself to focus.

"Why did Farroway depend on just you, Cooper?"

"Because we've known each other for a very long time," he explained, as my two companions emerged from behind me. Galen rubbed the back of his neck as if warding off an ache, while Shaw gratefully flexed his wings. "Twenty-two years, as a matter of fact. I served as a squire under his tutelage for two of those. Until he decided that I was too much of a pipsqueak to become a knight, and he sent me elsewhere."

Amazingly, Cooper didn't seem bitter about being dismissed. If anything, his voice sounded neutral. As if it was something so far removed that it wasn't worth discussing.

So I had to press a little further on this.

"You still worked with Sir Farroway," I said gingerly. "Even after he dashed your dreams of becoming a dragon knight."

"I did. It is true, I harbored resentment against him at first. But if he hadn't dashed those dreams, I might have never found my calling to be a smith. I've prospered over the years here. The man's lackluster leadership and excessive spending hurt the dragon part of the Air Cavalry, sure. But the coins came my way, and that has brought me satisfaction of a different sort."

It did sound like the big smith had grown up and gotten over the incident with Sir Farroway. I chewed at it from every angle I could. The story sounded plausible on its face. Switching tracks, I decided to cast about for some different information. Something that wasn't about the smith but would benefit from his knowledge.

“Shaw,” I asked, “do we still have that broken length of chain anywhere?”

“Oh, aye,” the griffin replied, with a bob of his head. “For ease of travel, I gave it to the Court Wizard.”

“Here we are,” Galen said, as he flexed his torso and pulled the chain out of his saddlebag. “This chain failed at a rather inconvenient time. It was holding back a dragon that wished to either maim or incinerate us.”

Cooper took the links and held them up to the light to study the break. While he did so, I looked around. Laid out before us in neat lines were lengths of whole chain. Sitting behind them were tables covered with half-finished hauberks of chain mail and sets of steel helmets.

The back wall opened onto a muddy rear courtyard rutted with wagon tracks. We’d seen this when first arriving at the smithy. Obviously, it allowed wagons to pull up and offload their burdens.

Off to the left, the glow of the smithy’s furnaces flickered, silhouetting men at work. The clank of hammers beating metal into shapes rang through the air. Finally, to the right lay a quiet room that – so far as I could tell – held three large piles of rusting junk.

“This is one of mine,” Cooper said, with an air of finality. “It didn’t fail on its own, I can tell you that much. Also, there’s a strike mark at the edge of the break.”

That made sense. The lower grade of steel used in Andeluvia versus the modern world had less carbon in it. That made it comparatively brittle and prone to cracking if flexed or hit in the right way. And Cooper’s conclusion lined up with what my friends and I had suspected.

“It’s been split by a heavy blade,” the smith continued. “And if this ‘failure’ happened at the South Keep, my guess is that it was split by a halberd.”

“Because the squires there only keep halberds around,” I said heavily. “Squire Rookhurst mentioned that. He also said they were forbidden to keep swords to prevent dueling.”

“Aye, there is that. But it’s mostly because halberds are useful in a

dragon stable in a way that swords aren't."

"How do you mean?"

Cooper gestured with his hands as he explained. "If you saw the halberds at the keep, you saw they had a hooked end. That allows a squire to snag an angry dragon by the wing or the horns up by its head. Two or three men can wrestle a dragon into a stable that way. It does bend and chip them something awful, but there's no way around that."

I pursed my lips as I thought about that. "How often do they send broken or chipped halberds to you?"

"Once or twice a week. It's to be expected when you're dealing with beasts that come with a griffin's cussedness – but without any of their intellect."

Shaw made a *chuffing* sound of approval. "Thou art correct, fine smith."

"The squires sent me the week's leavings just last night." Cooper gestured towards the junk room off to the right. "I've got at least three wagon loads of broken and bent items."

Galen took back the chain links and put them in his saddle bag. "What might you do with these damaged parts?"

"Depends on how roughly they've been handled. I'll have one of my boys sort them and see if we can bang something back into shape. If not, into the furnace it goes to be melted down."

I tried to keep my voice casual. "I wouldn't mind looking through those piles."

He gave me a look. "That might not be a good place for a fair lass like you. A scratch from a rusty edge, and you'll be down with stiffjaw."

Stiffjaw? It took me a moment to realize that was what Andeluvians called *tetanus*. I'd had a tetanus shot already, but I didn't want to get into discussing how vaccines worked right now.

"I have two strong males here to help me," I said. "I'll be fine."

Cooper frowned. He looked like he was about to argue the point when his name was called. He turned towards the furnace end of the smithy.

“Something’s come up with a special order from our new monarch,” he grumbled. “I need to look into it. Go ahead and look, but I can’t be responsible for your wellbeing.”

Galen watched the smith as the man stomped away. The Wizard rubbed his chin again.

“Flynn Cooper is a rather odd one, for a smith,” he intoned. “He works with gloves, but not a protective apron. Working without an apron leaves your torso exposed. Among many other risks, a man could singe his private parts off!”

I considered that. “Maybe he’s a risk taker at heart. How do you know about these hazards?”

The centaur smiled. “Some of my family is in the business of smithing. But more to the point, the man has no idea what your forensics magic is capable of. Which is working in our favor. At least for now.”

“Yeah, there is that,” I agreed. “And speaking of magic, it’s time I used some.”

We went over to the first pile in the junk room. This particular one had lots of broken shovels and some pieces of chain. At least it had lots of wooden handles to grab on to.

“Shaw, Galen, I need you to carefully pull out some of the projecting pieces of metal to spread out the pile for maximum surface exposure. Be careful, I don’t want either of you to get ‘stiffjaw’ either.”

“Griffins do not suffer that ridiculous condition,” Shaw scoffed.

“Healing magic can combat it,” Galen added, “though I shall take precautions.”

He turned and dug in a saddlebag, coming up with a pair of heavy work gloves. Then he and Shaw set to work, pulling out pieces of the pile with some ear-rending creaks and clatters.

I set down my case and opened it. It took me a little bit of fiddling, but in a few moments I was ready to go. I’d mixed a bit of concentrated luminol with some hydrogen peroxide, given it a little swirl, and dumped the mixture into a spray bottle. Finally, I walked up to the somewhat flattened pile and considered the light.

The flicker from the furnaces was subdued here, and the windows

had been shuttered. It was reasonably dim, which is what I wanted. Raising the bottle, I gave the pile a gentle spraying of the solution.

"I don't believe that I've ever seen an atomizer like that before," Galen observed. "In our world, they are only shaped for perfume."

"It's not for perfume," I explained. "I'm spraying these items with *luminol*. That's a chemical mixture that reacts with hemoglobin, a protein in fresh or dried blood."

"Then I sense thy purpose," Shaw declared, with an excited ruffle of a wing tip. "Shouldst there be a bloody weapon amidst the pile, one shall be able to spot it."

I nodded. "The presence of blood should turn the object a nice bright blue."

However, my careful spraying resulted in nothing but the cleaning fluid scent of luminol filling the air. My friends disassembled the second pile and I repeated the process. Again, nothing. The odor from the spray mist started to make me cough.

More clangs and din came from the last pile as my friends pulled it apart. Once more, I stepped up and coated everything with luminol mist. I stood back and silently counted to twenty. Just as I was about to pronounce this lead a dead end, something happened.

Lying at the edge of the jumble of broken chains and weapons was a wicked looking axe. Before my eyes, the blade shimmered bright blue. I allowed myself to grin for a moment.

My grin vanished as the broken spear next to the axe also turned blue. Then the length of chain next to the spear changed as well. More and more items followed, until the entire pile shimmered with a silent cyan glow.

Great. Wonderful. Perfect.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Sixteen

The heavy tread of footsteps announced Flynn Cooper's return. He stared at how we'd wrecked the semblance of order in his junk room. Then his apple cheeks went pale as he goggled at where the spread-out pile in front of us glowed bright blue.

"What…what sort of magic is this?" he gasped.

"It's forensics," I said patiently. "We're looking for a blade or other item with blood on it. So I used a substance that glows blue. Apparently, it works too well."

Cooper let out a hearty guffaw as color came back into his face.

"You must think we have a bevy of killers here! But this pile of used and broken tools…most of it's from the slaughterhouse down by the South Gate! I suppose your 'for-ensics' magic has miscarried."

Where the smith had gone pale, I turned beet red. Cooper shook his head as if chiding himself. Then, still chuckling, he returned to his work at the other end of the smithy. As for me? My wrist got a skin-blistering workout as I viciously *twanged* the 'Snap out of it!' rubber band again and again.

"'Tis a setback," Shaw said, as he eyed my actions curiously. "Yet not one which ends thy fight."

"Dayna," Galen said worriedly, "I realize that this is one of your mood-altering devices, but I must advise caution. Overuse of even minor forms magic can lead to adverse effects!"

I stubbornly looked down and kept on snapping the rubber band. I refused to meet my friends' eyes. Yes, I was trying to snap out of my frustration, but it was more than that. Here I was in this magical world, touting my forensic science as superior. That I knew what I was doing, all the way.

A first-year student at a Crime Lab wouldn't have made a mistake as bad as mine. Luminol reacted with hemoglobin, the protein responsible for transporting oxygen. But most vertebrate species had hemoglobin molecules in their species' blood. Dogs and cats had it. Centaurs and griffins had it. And sure as heck, cows and pigs had it.

I gave the band another twang. *Snap out of it!*

What use was I in this world if I couldn't use science to solve crimes?

Another, sharper twang. *Snap out of it!*

Each of my forensics efforts told me more about the crime. But nothing about who'd committed it. What was the use?

One more vicious twang. *Snap out of it!*

What else was I going do? Use magic? The one thing I couldn't do?

The rubber band made a *THWAP!* as it broke and flung itself somewhere into the luminol-soaked pile of debris. And my mind made one of its weird little 'clicks' in turn.

"Dayna–" Galen tried again. His voice was soft and full of concern.

I held up a hand. I needed one more second to make sense of it. Of course. I'd been banging my head against a wall. And all because I'd been given a hammer. Such a good hammer that everything had seemed like a nail.

"Of course," I breathed. "I've been using forensics at every turn. Just forensics."

"That is a laudable thing," the Wizard intoned. "It has gotten us quite far."

"Yes, but what I mean is…it doesn't have to be the *only* thing I use. I've relied upon you and Shaw for a lot of things. Flight. Strength. Keen senses."

"Aye, and 'tis our pleasure to help," the griffin put in.

"That you have, my friend," I said, as I patted his furry flank in thanks. "But each of you have talents you're willing to use for my benefit. Talents that include magic. And where forensics fails, that's where I need the help."

"You merely need state your request," said Galen.

"Right now, I need your advice. You recall that Liam once helped us locate the whereabouts of a weapon from my world. By casting his magic on a bullet."

The Wizard nodded. "That is a quirk of fayleene's fey magic, yes."

"I've been putting it out of mind," I admitted. "Because the last

time he cast his spell, it exhausted him. To the point that I felt it did him harm. I can't ask him to do that again. It wouldn't be right."

The centaur and griffin were quiet for a moment.

"'Tis a greater distance between thy world and ours than I thought," Shaw said, in as quiet a voice as I'd ever heard from him. "Prince Liam feels as I do about thy cause. Thou wouldst expose thy friend to dishonor by discounting his help."

"But…like I said…I don't want to put him at risk."

"Liam has been 'at risk' for every day of his life," Galen chimed in. "Once he was banished from the fayleene herd, he had no one else to help him in time of trouble. You were the first person to alter the course of his life for the better. I do not know if he can perform the magic you need without harm. Yet I agree with Grimshaw. You do him a grave disservice if you do not ask him."

I didn't blush this time, but I should have. Not only were my friends with me, they felt bound to me by even deeper bonds. I looked up and nodded.

"If we can find him," I said, "let's see if he can do this."

Galen's face broke into a grin. Shaw let out a caw of approval and headed towards the wagon-rutted courtyard outside. The sun had started breaking through the cloud cover, and the light made the griffin's white wings shine as he unfurled them.

"I shall seek out yon princeling," Shaw stated proudly. "He shall be easy enough to find, for I am hungry. Thus, all of mine own senses shall be extra keen when searching for deer flesh!"

With that, the griffin leapt into the air with a massive downbeat of his wings. In a few moments, he'd vanished from view. I watched him fly with more than a little concern.

"I hope he was joking," I said. I looked over to Galen. "He was joking, right?"

"Alas, I cannot be sure."

"What? Why not?"

"Well," Galen allowed, "we are dealing with a *griffin* here."

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Chapter Seventeen

The rest of the cloud cover had burned off by the time Shaw returned. The griffin swung in low over the rooftops, flaring his wings as he came in. His paws skidded a bit on the soft dirt, but his landing was a full grade better than two days ago.

"Any luck?" I asked, as Galen and I came out to greet him.

"Didst thou doubt me?" Shaw chortled, as he folded his wings. "Yon fayleene arrives even now."

Suddenly, I heard the light *click-clack* of cloven deer hooves on stone. Liam bounded down the road leading past the South Keep, startling a passing pedestrian along the way. He pulled up short and kicked up a cloud of dust as he reached the courtyard.

"I journeyed here as fast as I could," the princeling said. "Shaw said it was urgent."

Liam was breathing a little hard, but the fayleene wasn't anywhere close to being fatigued after running the length of the palace and then some. Once again, it occurred to me that as the lone two-footed member of the group, I was hopelessly slow and out-of-shape by comparison. I put that out of mind for now.

"It's more important than urgent," I reassured him. "I wanted to speak with you about using your magic."

He bobbed his antlers. "Of course. It's lucky that you sent our griffin friend to find me, though. I'd nearly left the palace grounds."

It took me a second to remember that the last time we'd talked, Liam had received a courier from the Fayleene Woods.

"Did this have to do with the message that came for you?" I asked. "The one from your kin two days ago, I mean."

"Essentially, yes. It merely said that I should remain here at King Fitzwilliam's palace until a new missive arrived. Which it did, just this morning."

"It must be important. Perhaps we shouldn't have delayed you."

The princeling made a contemptuous snort and pawed the ground. "All the new message told me was that I should return to the Fayleene

Woods as soon as possible. And the Lead Does can wait until their hooves root to the ground for all I care. If you need me, I am here first."

I had to resist the urge to bend down and hug the young stag.

"I do need you," I said, as I held up the metal shard in its plastic pouch. "My forensics has only taken me so far with finding the weapon this shard came from. I wanted to know if your fey magic can solve that problem…so long as it wouldn't cause any harm to you."

Liam canted his head to one side, as if trying to puzzle something out.

"Cause any harm to me?"

"Yes, any harm! No matter how slight, it's not worth it."

"But…why would such a request harm me?"

Galen quickly raised a hand to cover his smile. Shaw nudged him with a wingtip while whispering, 'See? I told thee!'

"Liam, the last time we did this, it took a lot out of you!"

"Yes, it did," he allowed, as he focused his green left eye on me. "But that was quite different. Maybe it's not as easy to understand if one does not practice magic."

"Maybe it is," I agreed. "But how is it different?"

The princeling tapped his forehoof against the ground as he answered. "It differs in three ways. First, I had been drugged by one of your 'rangers'. Second, we were looking for the magical spoor of an item, not the item itself. And third, the bullet used was created separately from the rifle we were trying to locate."

"And this shard is a part of the same object," I concluded. "All right. What do you need from us? Should we stand in a circle and place our hands on your antlers again?"

Liam shook his head. "As generous as that was to share your energy with me, I should be able to make do with my own. Simply place the shard before me."

I set the bag down and stepped back. Liam moved to carefully trace a circle around the bag with his nose, and then placed his forehoof firmly on the shard within it. The princeling murmured under his breath.

"*Cith piléar a chaitheamh ley duine*," he recited. He closed his eyes, and a flicker of light ran from the tip of his one whole antler down to his hooves. The air around us felt charged, and a shock of static ran from my index finger to my thumb, pricking me.

Liam opened his eyes. His pupils had vanished, to be replaced with emerald fire. Galen looked on, marveling at the display of magic. Shaw stepped back, his expression one of awe. When the princeling spoke again, his voice resonated a full two octaves deeper.

"I have found it. Follow me."

Wordlessly, we did so. Liam stepped up to the pile that had given me a whole wagonload of false positives. The tools and assorted junk lay dark and inert on the ground since the effect of the luminol had worn off long ago.

Until one long-handled piece began to shimmer in waves of bright blue once again. Liam touched his antler to it. The glow faded, as did the emerald flames in his eyes. He shook his head as if clearing it from a nap, and then spoke in a normal tone of voice.

"That's the one you're looking for," he announced.

I beamed. "Liam, you're a marvel."

He made one of his sweeping bows to me in reply. "Unless I am needed further, I suppose that I had better follow up on the Lead Does' request."

"You've done everything I needed and more," I said. "You won't be gone long, I hope?"

The princeling completed his bow and sighed. "Hopefully not more than a day or two."

"Travel safe, prince of the fayleene," Galen intoned.

"And if thou dost not travel safely," Shaw added, "Then we shall wreak vengeance upon any who waylaid thee!"

A strange, amused look crossed Liam's deer face. "I never thought I would say this, but…for some strange reason that pleases me. Fare thee well, friends."

With that, he turned and trotted out the rear courtyard. As was the way of the fayleene, he vanished in the twinkling of an eye. I opened my improvised evidence case and slipped on a pair of

disposable nitrile gloves.

I knelt and carefully pulled out the item identified by Liam's magic. His fey magic had re-activated the luminol compounds, making the dried spatters of blood stand out like turquoise beacons. The handle was long, skinny, and made of metal. Wherever the luminol glowed, it was in a mass of smeary blue swirls. That wasn't good; whether by accident or design, I couldn't get much in the way of prints from that.

The blade was hatchet-like, but strangely tapered towards the end. It bore a classic blood splash pattern, and my eyes were drawn to an indentation at the very edge. I took the shard from the plastic bag and held it up to the indentation. They fit perfectly.

I sat back on my heels. "Okay, we found our murder weapon. But what the heck is it? An axe of some sort?"

Shaw peered over my right shoulder and made a dismissive *clack* of his beak. "Methinks not! 'Tis of similar shape, but the balance is all wrong. The handle is like that of a pike, not a hand-axe. Never have I seen an object like this!"

"But I have," Galen said, in a tight, controlled voice. "I would recognize this tool anywhere. It is what my people call a 'heat-set chisel'."

"How would you recognize–" I began.

"As I have stated before, my family's business lies in smithing," the centaur said, as he pointed to various parts of the tool. "This tool is meant for one thing: to cut metal when it is still warm from the forge. The handle is made of metal so that it won't burn when up close to the flame. And the head is shaped in a way that it can receive the blow of a hammer on the back to drive it home."

"If you're right, that means–"

My voice broke off as I got up and turned to look behind us. For once, my luck was in. I expected Flynn Cooper to be lurking behind us with a real axe in hand. But he and his smiths were gone. The unmanned forges glowed dully from across the way.

"It is noon, or close enough to it," Galen said, answering my next question. "Likely as not there is nothing sinister about Cooper and his

men being gone. It is time for lunch, after all."

"Then thou must say what we all think," Shaw declared. "Couldst one such as this 'Cooper' be the murderer?"

"This raises the possibility," I hedged. "But it's not conclusive. Yes, this is a smith's tool. Perhaps he carried it up to the South Keep intending to kill Sir Farroway. Then once the deed was done, he threw it into a heap of bloody tools from the slaughterhouse, figuring that no one would think twice about seeing a bloodstained item in there. But there's no way for me to tell if Cooper was the one wielding this chisel.

"Alas, that is true," Galen said. "Any of the squires could easily have borrowed or stolen this tool from the smithy."

"And that brings us to the main problem with this line of thinking," I said. My fingers groped for my 'Snap out of it!' rubber band, but it was gone now. I settled for pacing back and forth as I talked. "As far as I can tell, Cooper's got the weakest motivation for killing Farroway of anyone we've spoken to!"

"He had been cut from the dragon knights by Sir Farroway," the Wizard allowed. "Yet he evinced no anger over it. That insult, as it were, lies far in the past. Other injustices committed by Farroway are much fresher. We know that Squire Rookhurst hated him for his 'swiving', and never getting promoted in three years. Squire Dawley could have resented him for being stuck at the lowest rung of the stable. And Squire Taneer may have wanted vengeance for being beaten and lamed."

"Couldst there have been some fresher insult to our friend Cooper?" Shaw inquired. "Rookhurst said that Farroway welshed on gambling debts."

"Yes, but he always made sure to pay for his gear, and for any upkeep related to the dragons," I pointed out. "We saw evidence of that in the duty room. Farroway's golden armor and samite clothes. Cooper even claimed that he'd gotten plenty of coin from the man."

"True," Galen chimed in. "This facility is well-kept and well-funded. The abundance of the green associated with the Royal Smiths is proof of that."

Shaw let out a snort. “A few coats of paint hardly prove thy case!”

“You might be surprised,” the Wizard insisted. “Their specific shade requires some hard-to-find ingredients. That raises the cost of their paint and dye, which is why you’ll only see it here.”

Galen’s last statement made me pause for a second.

Wait a minute, I thought. *That’s not quite true, is it? I* have *seen it somewhere else. But where? And why would it bother me so?*

My brain took off with that idea. Head Squire Rookhurst’s sneer as he talked about Farroway’s failings flashed across my mind. Then a burst of the smithy’s unique color. Followed by the brooch on Cooper’s outfit. The marks on his hand as he shook mine.

“Oh,” I gulped, as my hands went to my temples. “Wait a minute…”

“Dayna–” Shaw began, but Galen shushed him and watched me carefully.

The molars at the back of my mouth clenched as my mind put everything together in one massive *CLICK*.

“Of course…” I whispered. “I should have recognized it earlier. I saw it at the Hospitalliers and didn’t realize how important it was until now!”

The Wizard shook his head in amazement. “Your mind gallops three furlongs ahead of ours, Dayna.”

“Maybe it does, but I have to be sure. *I have to be sure*.” I put my hand on his, entreating him. “Can you get the three squires and the smith back to the Keep’s duty room for me?”

“I shall endeavor to do so.”

“Good. I’ll meet all of you there shortly.”

“But where might thy path lead?” Shaw asked. “If thou art three furlongs ahead of the Wizard, then I lag six more behind!”

“I’ll tell you later,” I promised. “I have to go back to the House of the Hospitalliers!”

“Really?” Galen said, startled. “Yet I was there at every step of the autopsy you performed. I saw no other clues at the House that pointed to a suspect!”

“Oh, there’s something there,” I insisted, as I turned leave. “It’s

just that this once, the evidence isn't on the autopsy table."

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Chapter Eighteen

The sun had begun its afternoon descent by the time I returned to the South Keep. I had a small cloth bag secured to my belt. Inside was proof positive of the facts I'd come to reveal.

True to his word, Galen had collected the four men in what the squires called the 'duty room'. The centaur remained standing off to one side, only nodding as I arrived. Shaw lay on the floor at the opposite end of the room, curled up like a sleepy cat. Though his eyes were closed, I knew better. The griffin's ears twitched ever so slightly as he heard my footsteps on the stone floor.

The smith sat next to the squires along one side of the room's long table, sharing out mugs of ale. Head Squire Rookhurst reclined against the end closest to Galen. The man rested an arm on a small cask, and he didn't take offense as the centaur refused a mug of the creamy brown liquid. Next to him, Flynn Cooper chatted with Squire Dawley, regaling the lad with some story. Squire Taneer sat a little apart from the others, looking pained as he rubbed his lamed leg just above the knee.

"Ah, Lady Chrissie returns," Cooper announced, after swallowing a sip from his mug.

"It's time a better-looking face arrived, especially now that work is done," Rookhurst said, sounding ever-so-slightly tipsy. "We moved Byzzurak back to her stall and replaced her restraint chain. And since your centaur friend couldn't tell us exactly when you would return, I decided to bring up a little refreshment from our cellar. We felt we'd earned it."

"Hear, hear," the smith chimed in, and Dawley's head bobbed in agreement.

Squire Taneer spoke up next. "In your absence, we've been going over the good times we've had with Sir Farroway. There's not much, but anything's worth drinking to."

"Well, I'm glad that you've been in the mood to swap stories," I said, as I came to stand before them. "Because I have an interesting

one to share about the man's demise."

"Oh, good! A pleasant subject!" Rookhurst chuckled. "Not to mention that the bard down at the tavern is as old and craggy as the hills. It'll be nicer to hear a tale from a comely young thing like you."

I smiled thinly at that.

"I should be flattered," I said. "Your attitudes certainly made my job easier. None of you have really taken my efforts at solving this crime seriously, even when your own necks might be placed in a noose."

That earned me a triple helping of sour looks, but nobody jumped up and objected. If anything, they seemed resigned to what I had to say next.

"When it comes right down to it, the Commander of the Air Cavalry picked his immediate subordinate based on loyalty and little else. Captain Vazura knew that Sir Farroway would obey without question, keep the dragons properly maintained, and that was enough. Your complaints and ambitions about Farroway meant nothing to him. Neither did the knight's obvious failings over the last two decades."

I got a grumbling agreement from the squires.

"But something finally brought the matter with Sir Farroway to a head," I said. "One of you had suffered an injustice at his hands that was so unspeakably vile, you *had* to kill him. Otherwise, he'd never have been punished. And the fact is, each of you had the perfect opportunity to strike. On the morning of Byzzurak's first flight."

"Now hold on," Cooper protested. He tipped his mug towards the squires as he added, "You may suspect one of these three fine lads. But I'm no dragon squire. The smithy is my place."

"But you're here almost every other day," Squire Dawley said, in his high-pitched voice. "With all the things that break around here, it really helps."

A scowl flitted across Cooper's face at that. "Even so, I don't work here, lad."

"You don't have to work here," I pointed out. "You only need to be able to come and go as you please without anyone noticing. That's simple enough when there are no guards at the door. And when you

can walk through the duty room at all hours, it would be easy to look at the task board. Anyone could see that Sir Farroway would be alone at that time, isolated, and in the middle of a very hazardous task."

The smith let out a grunt. "Ridiculous."

"I agree, it's ridiculous." All four men perked up at that, so I continued. "That is, it's ridiculous without a motive. And that's the real question here, isn't it? What would motivate any of you to murder Sir Farroway and then cover the crime up by making it look like an accident? A lack of promotion? Unlikely. Discipline meted out so harshly that one ends up lamed? Better. But what about Farroway's 'swiving'? I'd bet that the Head Squire lost a girlfriend to Farroway's meddling."

Rookhurst stared at me for a moment before dropping his gaze.

"I don't understand how you knew," he grumbled. "I'd only met – I'd only been with Leetha for a fortnight at most. I didn't think it would hurt so much."

The smith reached over with his free hand and patted the squire on the shoulder. "No one does, lad."

"And it all goes back to the reason you're here, Cooper," I said, and my voice grew hard. "The fact that you started at this very Keep, serving under Sir Farroway. Until he had you dismissed from the Air Cavalry, that is."

The big man let out a snort that would've done credit to Shaw. "If I was that angry over being cut from this place, you'd think I'd have done the man in before twenty more years went by."

I held up a finger. "Bear with me for a moment. I'll return to that point. Earlier, you laughed at my 'forensics' magic. It's not really magic, but the laughter did sting. It made me realize that I had to use other talents at my disposal. My friend's magic, for one. My own talent for observation, for another. But between all these things, I finally have a story you'll want to hear."

"That remains to be seen," Rookhurst grumbled.

"Let's say that our friend from the Royal Smithy wanted to kill Sir Farroway. He knows which day the man will be most vulnerable. Which doors to enter and leave by without being seen. And most

importantly, he knows that if he can make this knight's death look like an accident, no one will care enough to look closely at the matter."

"You think Cooper snuck in early that morning?" Squire Taneer asked. "Just so he could lay in wait for Sir Farroway?"

I shook my head.

"No. He first snuck in the night before and jammed Byzzurak's feed chute. It's a smart move. The young dragon would probably attack someone if they were bleeding. But if the creature is hungry as well…then that's pretty much a *guarantee* the attack will take place."

"A dragon wouldn't just attack!" Dawley piped up. Obviously, the idea that someone else was at fault for the faulty feed chute appealed to him. "They'd eat you up! That's what happened to Sir Farroway, at least."

"Thereby destroying any evidence of a human's part in the murder," I said, following the thought up. "After jamming the feed chute the prior night, Cooper shows up the next morning and waits until Farroway has taken Byzzurak to the Launching Square. The smith confronts Farroway, says his piece, and then strikes. The wounds on Farroway's body are from a heavy weapon with a blade striking from above. And the first blow was aimed specifically to disable the hand that knight would use to draw his sword in defense."

Cooper sat up straight on that last bit. The edge of his mouth twitched, once.

"Sir Farroway's badly wounded now. He stumbles back, hitting the wall and leaving a massive splatter mark. Byzzurak's inhaled the blood scent by now, she's straining at her bonds to slake her hunger. Our murderer gives Farroway a shove to the side and unlatches the last chain tethering the dragon. Then he lets her do what comes naturally while he leaves via one of the side passages back to the smithy."

"So you think that Cooper is responsible," Rookhurst mused, as he ran his fingers along the fringe of his beard. "Because murder involved a sword, and we don't have any in this Keep."

"The murderer didn't use a sword," I corrected the squire. "He used a hot-set chisel from the smithy. But that's not why I think one

person is guilty over another. In fact, I have to admire the guts it took to pull the crime off. It would have worked perfectly – if Captain Vazura hadn't ordered Farroway to release two dragons from this Keep to kill me and the Court Wizard. Commander Yervan thought that I would be interested in this case specifically because of that attack. And that brings me to the second attempt on my life. The one that took place here yesterday."

"Surely you're joking!" Taneer said, with a nervous laugh. "Even if we accept the first part of the story, how would Cooper have known about your coming here? How would he know when you would be down in the Flight Hall? And how would he engineer the restraint chain to fail?"

"Might I answer that?" Galen asked, and I gestured for him to take the floor. "Perchance you have noticed how open this duty room is. How much the stone walls here echo. Anyone who could enter an unguarded building such as this could simply listen in. Lady Chrissie made it clear that she meant to solve this murder. That she meant to visit the Flight Hall to see the bloody remnants at the crime scene. And that Byzzurak was about to be released from her stable yet again."

"Your stable doors have dragon-proof latches, but they're not locked," I added. "It would be easy to slip into Byzzurak's stall, weaken the restraint chain with a blow from any number of a smith's tools, and then leave unobserved. Remember, the feed chute had been blocked for two days now. A famished dragon smelling dried blood from a crime scene was sure to attack anyone in her path."

Rookhurst shot Cooper a dirty look. "Anyone in her path. Anyone 'expendable', I take it?"

For his part, Cooper glared back. He flexed his jaws and spoke as if biting each word that came from his mouth.

"This is a fine story," he gritted. "But so are drunken boasts told around the tavern over a jug of mead! Do you really think that my dismissal from this Keep, all those years ago, is reason enough for me to murder a man?"

"No, it's not," I said. "Like most people, you would only kill if you

knew one thing: that there would be no justice unless you took it with your own hands."

"Then what justice did he seek?" Squire Taneer demanded. "Can you answer that?"

"Yes," I replied. "In fact, I can show it to you."

Everyone's eyes were riveted on me as I slowly took the cloth bag from my belt.

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Chapter Nineteen

All eyes watched as I brought the cloth bag up from my belt. I moved to hold it in the palm of one hand. But I didn't unveil the contents just yet.

There was a little more to tell first.

"The first thing I did when I accepted this case from Commander Yervan was visit the House of Hospitalliers," I said. "Mistress Hildegard showed us through the building. Along the way, I learned what services the House offers to the people of Andeluvia. Emergency medical services. Herbal medications. Basic health care. People could pay for this up front – or they could pawn personal items.

"I spotted a woman there when I visited. I didn't think much of it at the time. In fact, I'd have forgotten what I saw had it not been for one thing: she had a newborn baby, swaddled in a cloth. Specifically, it was a cloak. One dyed the exact same shade of moss green that was granted by King Julian to the Guild of the Royal Blacksmiths."

Cooper's cheeks drained of all color as I went on.

"This woman was being treated in the section that handled indigents. In order to pay for her child's treatment, she put the most valuable thing she had left in care of the House of the Hospitalliers."

I reached into the bag, grabbed the item inside, and held up my prize. A golden ring glittered from between my fingers. And a very familiar pattern adorned it.

"This ring has the exact same pattern as the Royal Smith's brooch," I stated. "It's a wedding ring decorated with a pair of crossed hammers. And it belongs to your wife, doesn't it, Cooper?"

"I thought you said that Maisie had left," Rookhurst said, frowning. "That she was visiting relatives at Castle Ivor."

The smith ignored him. Instead, he spoke to me.

"What if that was my wife?" he asked defiantly. "That doesn't prove anything about me. Or that miserable excuse of a knight, Sir Farroway."

"Are you so sure of that?" I asked. I laid down my final cards,

along with a little bluff at the very end. “I think it proves a great deal. Because of Farroway’s nasty habit of ‘swiving’. The pieces are all there, if you choose to look at them. Her arrival at the House of the Hospitalliers without a single coin in her pocket. A newborn baby in her arms. Her separation from you. The white mark on your left hand where you’ve taken off your own wedding ring.

“Yes, there’s plenty of motive there for a man who wanted revenge to commit murder. And incentive to kill anyone who might get to the bottom of your plot. Now that I have that heat-set chisel, it shouldn’t be too hard for me to determine who held it when they attacked Sir Farroway.”

Cooper leapt to his feet.

The big man whirled and smashed his fist into Galen’s chin. The centaur rocked with the blow and staggered backwards two steps. His rear legs went wobbly and his equine rump came down hard on the floor.

The smith then hurled his heavy earthenware mug at the three squires. Ale splattered in Dawley and Taneer’s faces. A *crack* as the mug hit Rookhurst in the face and shattered. The Head Squire rolled off the bench, unconscious. The ale cask came with him, sloshing nutty brown liquid across the flagstones.

I went for the gun in my shoulder holster. But I’d barely gotten the side of my jacket thrown back by the time Shaw moved into action. He uncurled from his feigned slumber in the blink of an eye. Then he leapt at Cooper as the man ran past me.

One of the griffin’s paws raked across the back of the smith’s shoulders. A triple set of bloody cloth strips fluttered to the floor. Cooper staggered. He kept his feet and ran through the one of the adjoining narrow passageways. Shaw landed, pivoted, and stopped short of a second leap. Skidding to a stop before the exit, he eyed the stone columns on either side. They blocked his fur-covered shoulders, to say nothing of his wings.

“Fie, fie! ‘Tis too narrow!” he spat, his voice a sizzle of feline growl and snarls.

I turned to the two remaining conscious squires. “Where does that

passage lead?"

"Down to the Main Flight Hall!" Dawley squeaked. "From the hall, he could go anywhere!"

"Needs I must leave, then!" Shaw declared. The griffin bounded back towards the Keep's main entrance. I made my way over to Galen, extending a hand to help him up. He accepted, though I doubted that any human could make much difference in lifting up a centaur.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

The Wizard gingerly felt his chin. "I suspect that a new bruise has been sown. Goodness, that smith is a strong one. He hits as hard as my mother."

"Um, yeah," I said, flustered. "We'll come back to that later. Right now, we need to capture him."

"Then let us return to the Flight Hall as we are able."

Taneer called out to us as we headed down the hallway leading to the interior parapet. "I haven't greased the turning wheel yet, that way is still blocked!"

"Mayhap," Galen replied, "but this way is still the shortest."

The centaur put his hands out as we reached the doors at the end of the hallway. He gave a shove, which made the doors creak outwards by an inch or two. The Wizard let out a rare curse and turned to face back the way we came. Then, he leaned forward as he dipped his forelegs. With a metallic *smash*, his rear hooves kicked the doors free of their hinges.

I leapt through the opening, firearm at the ready. The heady smell of sulfur filled my nose as the echoes of the wrecked doors rattled my ears. Movement came from the base of the parapet steps to my right.

Cooper stood at the bottom of the steps, next to one of the open weapons cases, clenching a halberd in one beefy hand. He didn't hesitate. The man's arm moved in a deadly arc as he flung the weapon up the stairs.

Instinctively, I ducked and moved forward. That was the wrong choice. The point-heavy halberd wobbled in the air and landed short, slightly below me. But the hook portion caught on the edge of the step and flipped over. The wooden shaft gave me a whack on the side of

the head.

I saw stars as I stopped to brace myself against the wall. Cooper grabbed a second halberd and made as if to charge me with it. I raised my gun and squeezed off a shot that thundered in the cavernous space. A *thunk*, and the halberd's handle shattered just below the base of its sharp metal head.

The smith stared at the ruins of his weapon for only a moment. He groped for a yet another tool from the case when Galen appeared on the parapet above me with a clatter of hooves. The Wizard's voice spoke a trio of words, and the wall-mounted case exploded in a shower of splinters.

Cooper gave a strangled cry, then turned and fled. Galen and I took the rest of the steps at a run, following hot on his trail. The smith wasn't hard to follow. His upper back was a mass of shredded gore. Blood streamed from his wounds as he ran.

With a predatory screech, Shaw soared into the Flight Hall through the open hangar doors. His challenge was almost lost in the din of roars and rattling chains that came from the agitated dragons in their holding stalls.

The smith pounded to a stop before Byzzurak's stall. He turned to face us, defiant. He'd pulled a small knife from somewhere in his clothes and held it in one bleeding hand. His moss-green Royal Blacksmith tunic either lay in tatters or dripped fresh blood.

"It's over, Cooper!" I shouted. "There's nowhere to run."

His eyes, fever-bright, flicked about to confirm what I'd said. My gun was drawn, so he wasn't about to charge back up the steps. Galen waited next to me, his palms glowing with magical energy. Shaw hovered overhead, ready to swoop down upon him.

"Be reasonable," Galen chimed in. "Allow us to take you before Commander Yervan. Plead mercy and he may bestow it upon you."

"He's a man of the law," Cooper husked, and I heard the tired wheeze in his voice. "He does not know of justice. None of you do!"

"Yervan is a man of justice," I said, trying to reason with him. "If you only–"

"What would you know of justice?" the smith shot back. His voice

rose, raw in its anger and desperation. “It isn’t justice when a knight looks with contempt upon another who never got to be a dragon rider! It isn’t justice when that same knight seduces your wife! And how is it *justice* when he leaves her heavy with his child? Answer me that!”

“Cooper, I…I can’t,” I admitted. “But you broke the law. You have to answer for it, it’s the only thing an honorable man can do.”

His jaw twitched.

“No. There is another honorable way out. Not for me…but for my wife. The woman I loved. And it is the only one I shall take!”

Galen realized what the man meant a nanosecond before I did.

“For pity’s sake, don’t do it!” the Wizard cried.

The big man slammed a bloody shoulder into the stable door. The latch popped free. Inside, Byzzurak roared as she raged against her restraint chain to get at the iron-rich scent of the smith’s wounds.

Blood streaming from his wounds, the man rushed inside.

Cooper had time to scream, once.

Then the wet sounds of tearing flesh silenced him.

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Chapter Twenty

A passing rainstorm in the night led to a drizzly and unexpectedly chill morning.

Scarlet embers glimmered in the tower room's hearth, filling the high-domed space with welcome heat and the comforting smell of the fire. I sat at the wooden table, rubbed my hands, and felt a tingle run through them as I spoke.

Across from me, perched on the corner of his bench, Commander Yervan listened impassively as I spoke. He'd accepted the manila folder I'd brought. In that folder, I had detailed every step of the investigation and its outcome.

While I had provided everything in writing Yervan could have wanted or needed, I'd instinctively known that an Andeluvian man would want to hear what I had to say out loud. As if my voice could somehow soften the blow of distressing subjects like corruption, infidelity, murder, and suicide. I ran through each and every aspect of the case from autopsy to unveiling. The Commander took in my words attentively, but without much comment. I ended by covering the last threads worth tying up.

"I confirmed many of my suspicions when I spoke with Flynn Cooper's wife," I said. "When Cooper found out about the affair, he flew into a rage and threw his wife and her baby out into the street. He'd felt doubly betrayed, because he discovered it only just after the child was born."

Yervan gave me a surprised look. "That is a strange time for anyone to confess to straying outside the bonds of marriage."

"Maisie Cooper didn't confess. Rather, she and her husband both have blue eyes, but the baby's eyes were brown."

"Indeed. Now I see why the smith got so angry. Blue-eyed parents cannot produce brown-eyed offspring."

"You'd be surprised," I cautioned. "It can happen, though rarely. But the point was that Cooper believed without a doubt that he'd been betrayed by his wife. For now, Maisie's staying at the House of the

Hospitalliers. She's trading her labor there for room and board, but it barely meets her and the child's needs. That's why she had to pawn her wedding ring in the first place. I purchased it from the House to bring it to the Keep, but I've since returned it to her."

"A nice gesture."

"But only a gesture," I said listlessly. "It doesn't change her situation. She'll likely pawn it again within the week."

The Commander's jaw twitched. "What about our three squires?"

"They've all left the South Keep after penning their resignations. I suggested it as a way for them to leave service with honor."

"I wasn't aware that their honor was at risk. The smith was the guilty party."

"Cooper was guilty," I acknowledged, "but at least one of those men knew more than they were letting on. After they'd sent the smith's remains to the House of the Hospitalliers, I took another look at their task board. They've never mopped the passages leading from the Flight Hall before."

A raise of an eyebrow. "But they cleaned those hallways shortly after the murder."

"Someone must have found a blood trail leading out of the Keep and down towards the smithy. After all, Cooper had dealt Farroway a series of axe-like blows at very close range. The smith would have been dripping with red afterwards. Under normal circumstances, he'd have left a trail as clear as day."

"Considering how badly Sir Farroway treated them, I suppose that any one of the squires would've been happy to help advance the 'unfortunate accident' story."

"Exactly. When I last spoke with the them, I suggested that I might be looking into who mopped up the passageways. That was enough of a hint for someone with a whiff of guilt to scatter."

Yervan leaned back, chewing over what I'd told him. Then he studied me curiously.

"You sound strangely glum about all this," he observed.

I nodded wearily. "I suppose I am."

"Melancholy is badly out of place here, Lady Chrissie!" Yervan

protested. “Congratulations are in order! Do you not recall what I said earlier? You cannot buy trust, but you can build it over time. When it becomes known that you’ve unveiled another murderer, the nobles on the Royal Court shall know of your unique abilities! They shall accord you the respect you richly deserve!”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

A frustrated *hiss* escaped from my mouth. I got up and turned away to look out one of the tower room’s narrow windows. The drizzle had faded away, leaving nothing but drifting fog. The scarlet orbs of rose blossoms poked out from the mist along a hedge far below.

“That’s just it!” I complained. “I haven’t been able to sleep because of what I’ve brought to light. I *don’t* want anyone to know about this case!”

My words rocked Yervan. “I’m not sure what to say to that. Except to ask the obvious. Why?”

“Just before Cooper killed himself, he claimed that none of us knew what justice was. He was right – at least from his point of view. He saw himself as a victim of injustice, since no one was going to touch Sir Farroway. So he took revenge the only way he could.”

“By murdering a veteran dragon knight,” Yervan said drily. “And attempting to murder you.”

“Flynn Cooper was no angel, that much is for sure. He also threw his wife and her newborn baby into the street. But the fact is, *he* was wronged as well. And punishing a dead man serves no just cause. No justice.”

“Then what are you suggesting?”

I squared my shoulders and turned back to face the Commander before I spoke.

“That you disregard my report. You see, I asked Galen to look into the bylaws of the Royal Smith’s Guild. If you formally pronounce Flynn Cooper guilty of murder, then he loses the royal pension he earned for twenty years of honorable service.”

“A dead man has no use for a pension, Lady Chrissie.”

“No, but his wife does,” I insisted, as I leaned forward on the table

to plead my case. “Cooper knew this. It’s why he said there was an honorable way out. Not for him, but for his wife. Even after her betrayal, his mistreatment of her…I believe that he still loved her. *That’s* why he threw himself in front of a dragon at the end. So that he’d perish without confessing his guilt for the murder. So that she could still benefit from his legacy.”

Commander Yervan crossed his arms, staring down at his lap. He was silent for several seconds. Finally, he got up with a *creak* of the leather straps under his gold-trimmed armor plate. He picked up the manila folder containing all the case’s details.

Then he walked to the glimmering hearth and tossed the folder into it.

The fire flared up briefly as the papers went up into ash. Yervan turned and walked past me. He stopped at my side and placed an armored hand on my shoulder.

“I always knew that you were intelligent, Lady Chrissie,” he said quietly. “But I never suspected you were also so wise.”

The big knight lowered his hand and walked to the door. Before he left, he spoke once more, in a voice as low-pitched as before.

“No one shall speak of Sir Farroway’s tragic accident or Flynn Cooper’s suicide ever again. I shall instruct one of my guardsmen to bring the smith’s wife back home. She and her child shall receive every coin from her husband’s long service to the crown. Upon my honor, I shall see to it personally.”

The heavy wooden door thumped shut behind Yervan as the man left to do just that.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Counselor Lewellyn finally had a half-decent poster behind her desk. Instead of cartoons and equally cheesy self-talk, this one had a sober font laid over the image of Buddha sitting in the lotus position.

Even the saying seemed wise instead of gimmicky.

Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.

I resolved do better from now on. It wasn't going to be easy. But two steps forward and one step back still meant I was moving in the right direction.

However, I was facing a strong headwind right now. A headwind the form of Vickie Lewellyn.

"So, you're telling me that you broke and lost your stress ball," she said, her blonde tresses fairly bouncing with agitation. "Then, you broke and lost your 'Snap Out of It' rubber band?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Dayna, I'm just so…" Lewellyn screwed her face up as she struggled for a word. "Disappointed, I guess. I mean, it seems like you've made some kind of progress, if I'm reading your energy right."

"Oh, you are," I reassured her. Actually, ever since she'd ditched the cinnamon and lavender-scented smog devices, it was a lot easier to pretend to be pleasant. "I'm managing my anger a lot better these days."

Her voice held volumes of disbelief. "Really. Then tell me what you've been doing. Be specific."

My face didn't waver from its (somewhat) enthused expression. Inwardly, I groaned. My brain cast about for something, anything, that would fit this woman's railroad-track view of human behavior.

But I found something. Last session, she'd told me to visualize a peaceful scene. I latched on to that idea, closed my eyes, and went there in my mind.

"I'm standing before the narrow, arched window of a medieval castle's tower," I said. "It's morning, and the view far below is of the

palace grounds. The air outside smells of gentle rain, and a soft mist clings to everything. Peeking through the mist, I see the scarlet orbs of rose blossoms along a hedge far below. I inhale, taking in that scent of rain and rose and mist. Then I breathe out any of those bad feelings I had before."

Lewellyn's chair squeaked as she leaned forward. "That's very good! Are you a princess in this castle?"

Eyes still closed, I shook my head. "No, but I'm welcome here. I have friends, good friends here who support me."

"Marvelous, tell me more about them."

Inwardly, I shrugged and thought: *To hell with it.*

"One's a centaur. He looks like Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights crossed with a Friesian stallion. Another is a griffin, he's golden furred, white-feathered, and with a great eagle's head. And the final one looks like a white-tailed stag, only he's got both a brown and green eye, and he's missing most of one antler. Honestly, I don't know what I would do without them."

The Counsellor went silent. I peeked by opening one eye a tad. Lewellyn had a dreamy look on her face.

"Your creative visualization technique is simply astounding!" she breathed. "That's a bit more…well, involved than I usually hear. But you're on the right track!"

I opened my eyes. "I am?"

"Surely!" The neon smile winked on again. "I knew that I would be able to reach you! In fact, any doubts I had were surely from some other source!"

"Surely," I agreed, with a vigorous nod of my head. "I'm so happy you were able to, ah, reach me."

Lewellyn snatched a piece of official-looking paper from a nearby stack and began to jot notes on it.

"I'm going to file a recommendation that you be taken off suspension so that you can return to part-time work at the very least. And I'll make sure that you have your case formally reviewed by the probation board. You've made my week with all your progress!"

"You made mine too," I said, as I got up to leave. "Thank you."

I did well. I was able to hold my sigh of relief until I left Lewellyn's office and reached the elevator. Then I leaned against the wall, so relaxed that I almost forgot to push the button for my floor.

I'd left a jacket draped over my office chair. That was when I'd retrieved the now-defunct stress ball. This time, I wasn't going to leave anything else behind in exchange.

My feet felt weightless as I finally turned down the right corridor and entered my office. For some strange reason, it felt more like a home to me now that it ever had before. I went around behind my desk and picked up the wayward piece of clothing. Then I turned to head out.

I paused and looked back inside. My eyes roamed over the mountainous piles of memos and folders spread across the desktop. But even past-due paperwork didn't bother me right now.

My mind was elsewhere.

Yes, Andeluvia definitely needed another category of murder, I mused. *'Premeditated', 'intentional', 'manslaughter', and 'death by dragon'.*

That fourth class of murder had a ring to it. It helped remind me that, although Andeluvia was a magical place, it had dangers to match its beauty. Terrible dangers that came from men, monsters, and magic.

Now that I thought about it, they probably *could* use the services of a crime scene analyst like myself. At least now and again.

The thought comforted me as I closed the office door behind me and headed home.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *Forensics and Dragon Fire*, the bonus novella in the 'Fantasy & Forensics' series. This story was based on some ideas I had about how Dayna would have proven herself as an investigator in this still-foreign fantasy land. It also shows why she's held in such high esteem by Commander Yervan – who gives her a great deal of quiet support in the later books.

On that note, let's go find out what Liam was called away for in the next book coming up, *The Deer Prince's Murder*!

Michael Angel

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BOOK TWO: THE DEER PRINCE'S MURDER

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Chapter One

Not more than an hour before, I'd been at the witness stand for the LAPD, explaining how bodies decompose more slowly in cold weather.

Now, as I stood in the middle of a dark forest with nothing on except a bra and panties, I could've groaned at the irony of it all. My skin, which had the oh-so-attractive medical examiner's indoor tan, gleamed white and pink. I probably looked like a freshly plucked chicken, since I was all goose-pimpled up in places I didn't even think you could *get* goose-pimples.

"Galen, can we speed this up a little?" I asked, as I tried to keep my teeth from chattering. "Or at least let me put some clothes back on?"

"In point of fact, no," came the Wizard's reply. "Your transformation will do a great deal of damage to your outer clothing, if left on. As for 'speeding this up'? This spell takes a great deal of concentration. Silence would be preferable for the next minute or so."

Galen certainly looked the part of the Court Wizard for King Fitzwilliam of Andeluvia. From the waist up, his brooding, darkly handsome looks and wine-colored cloth jacket made him a shoo-in for a theatre production of an Emily Brontë novel. Below that, he had the muscular body of a chestnut draft horse. He cast an annoyed glance at the pair of wry snorts that came from the two people next to him, and then went back to consulting his open leather-bound book.

One of the centaur's two companions reclined on the forest floor. His lion's body softly gleamed with golden fur shot through with bits of gray. Shaw, formerly 'Grimshaw' of the kingdom's Air Cavalry, still looked every inch like a royal guard of Andeluvia. His dense fur shifted to white feathers where muscular wings were held tucked against his back. The proud griffin turned away for a moment as his stern eagle's beak preened a few stray plumes back into place.

Galen's other companion had no feathers, and he didn't have

Shaw's massive presence. But what Prince Liam lacked in size, he made up for in cervine charm. Liam was a princeling of the fayleene, a magical race of white-tailed deer. He'd have made a wonderful six-point buck, but an accident in his youth had snapped his left antler, leaving him with a stub that projected three or four inches from his skull. He also had a condition that I'd first learned about in high school biology class – *heterochromia*, where an individual has different colored eyes. But it wasn't Liam's emerald left or brown right eye that had marked him as an outcast from his people until now. Rather, it was his reputed lack of fayleene magical luck.

I wasn't too sure of that, to be honest. Liam's luck had probably been more 'good' than 'bad', when it came to everything that had happened between us. Between all four of us: human, centaur, fayleene, and griffin.

About a month ago, I'd been called in as a crime-scene analyst when a body had been discovered, smack in the middle of a demolition zone in downtown Los Angeles. I discovered the hard way that Galen had placed an enchanted medallion on the corpse to summon me to the realm of Andeluvia, a realm where sorcery worked and magical beings routinely did everything from manage the forests to write the tax code.

Of course, the call didn't come as part of a vacation package. In fact, I'd been summoned out of desperation. Someone had assassinated Good King Benedict and framed the centaurs for the deed, bringing the world of Andeluvia to the brink of war. Which meant that they needed the services of someone like me to untangle the mess and defuse the situation before everything exploded.

Just my rotten luck.

Yes, there had been more than a few moments where the light at the end of the tunnel looked just like an oncoming train. The court soothsayer had publicly denounced me as soon as I'd shown up. The realm's leading nobles had jumped at the opportunity to gain new land in the approaching war. And the centaurs wanted their chance to fight and win glory for their race.

Oh, and let's not forget the real villain of the piece: the centaur

wizard, Magnus Killsheven. Magnus hadn't only murdered Benedict. He'd also killed the king's right-hand man, Duke Kajari, and then magically transformed himself into the Duke's form so that he could play the acting Regent.

But I'd gotten to the bottom of the crime. Magnus and the other treacherous lords were at King Fitzwilliam's mercy, in the palace dungeon. So far, the new king had been lenient, at least by his medieval kingdom's standards. He'd held off on executing the wizard who'd murdered his father – and the lords who'd been quick to turn a blind eye to the crime.

Myself, I'd never have solved anything without my friends. Galen had been cast off by his father; Shaw, by his rider, Captain Vazura of the king's Air Cavalry. And Liam had been living in near exile from his people until I'd been offered his help. But no matter their origin, all three had come through for me in a tough spot. They'd do a hell of a lot if I asked, and I would do the same for them.

Which brings me to the reason I was freezing my ass off in the middle of this cold forest.

Fitzwilliam had offered me the job of official Court Forensics Examiner. It was pretty darned tempting, especially when LAPD Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy was still after me for blipping out of sight during a murder investigation. To be fair, even if I'd been allowed to tell him what was really going on, I don't think he'd have believed me. Bob wasn't the kind of person who'd take kindly to a tale of magical homicide, centaur wizards, and talking deer. So, since I was still on probation, I took up the king's offer to spend more time in his realm.

That brings me up to a couple of days ago. Galen and Shaw had joined me in one of the palace's corner towers – a drum-shaped, dunce-capped thing right out of Disneyland, complete with a roaring hearth to warm the cool evening drafts and a big wooden table smack in the middle of the room.

I'd been teaching the centaur and griffin how to play board games. To my surprise – and Galen's dismay – it turned out that Shaw was a natural. The rattle of dice was followed by a groan as the Wizard

grasped his thimble token and moved it around the edge of the board. It came to rest on a blue-edged space that sported a bright red hotel. Shaw smacked the table with one mighty leonine paw and let out a deep chuckle before he spoke in his distinctive archaic style.

"Thou hast landed on Boardwalk!" he crowed. "Give me all of thy gold and finest mares, centaur!"

"Fuss and balderdash," Galen grumbled, as he thumbed through his stack of bills. "I have no mares to give, but when it comes to my paper, take the lot."

"You might have to mortgage a property or two," I added, stifling a grin. "That's a full hotel our griffin friend has on there."

"Nay, nay," Shaw demurred, as Galen placed the bills in his outstretched paw. "A true and merciful heart yet beats within me. Let the Wizard play on, such as he is able."

"And I may yet deliver your comeuppance," Galen remarked, as he handed me the dice. "Truly, this is a game where fortune can turn on even the most confident of players."

I rolled, and then went to grab the piece cast in the shape of a Scottish terrier. The wooden door off to our side opened with a *bang* as Liam cantered through. He panted, and his breath would've come out in steamy puffs had it not been for the warmth from the fire. Though deer faces weren't as expressive as human ones, his eyes conveyed something between excitement and panic.

I stood and went over to him. "What is it, Liam?"

"Dayna," he said, between breaths, "it is as I had feared. It is happening. I…could really use your help, if you're willing."

That got my attention. Liam's voice was that of a young man, and his musical fayleene accent came across as vaguely Gaelic to my ear. But in three sentences, he'd gone from fearful and prophetic…then on to a rather wishy-washy request.

"Come, Dayna!" Shaw called from the table. "If none of the fayleene lie mortally wounded, return to finish our game. Thou hast journeyed upon my railroad to the price of–"

"Not now, Shaw." I motioned for Liam to go on.

"The Lead Does handle things from day to day," he said. "But

there is one who serves as the ruler of my people. The fayleene stag who embodies the magical heart of the woods, who makes both it and the peoples within flourish: The Protector of the Forest. ‘Ere last night, I received word – a rumor, actually – that Quinval, the current Protector, was stepping down as the ruler and guardian of the fayleene.”

I nodded, already impressed with the gravity of the situation. On my first visit to Andeluvia, I’d been given some tutoring on the subtle, potent power of fayleene magic. Albess Thea, the owl leader of the kingdom’s Parliament, had told me that it was the magic of the fallow field, of the evergreen forest, of the stillness before the sun rises. And she’d told me why I needed one of the fayleene: for centuries, nobody with one of these fey magical deer on their side had ever failed at a task or lost a battle. Sure enough, I’d succeeded in bringing King Benedict’s killer to justice. I didn’t know if it was due to fayleene juju or something else. But I wasn’t about to mess with it.

“Stags of Quinval’s stature only step down once in a generation,” Liam continued. “When they announce their intentions, a ceremony is held in the Sacred Grove at the heart of our woods. All the princelings of the realm attend, for the Lead Does pick the one most worthy, the one most fit, to become the Heir Apparent. To apprentice under the current Protector, until he deems the newly raised Heir ready for the role.”

“All right,” I acknowledged, “it sounds like the rumor carried the truth, this time.”

“Indeed, Dayna. I just received the summons to return to the woods my people call home. In two days hence, I must attend the ceremony at the Sacred Grove. To do otherwise risks my permanent banishment.”

“Dost thou wish our presence for thy imminent coronation?” Shaw asked, with a fluff of his feathers. “Simply ask, and we shall be at your side.”

“No! It’s not like that, not at all!” Liam exclaimed. “There is no chance I will be chosen. Other bucks have their full set of antlers, and the magic of my kind’s luck. I am unsuitable, a cast-off.”

I frowned. “You know what we think about that nonsense.”

“Even if you are correct, there are still others who are more suited to the task. But no matter the choice of the Lead Does, I must attend. Only fayleene are allowed into the Grove. And as per my kind’s law, I must have…a female consort at my side, or I will be refused admission.”

“I still don’t see a problem,” I said, but that wasn’t quite true. Liam hadn’t let the other shoe drop yet. “You should have your pick of the does. Helping me take down the wizard who killed Good King Benedict got you a lot of what we’d call ‘street cred’ in Los Angeles.”

“That ‘cred’, as you put it, has dimmed. It is possible that the loss of the jewelry you gifted me played a part.”

He flicked his spoon-shaped ear in emphasis. Sure enough, the Andeluvian healing magic that everyone had been given after the last battle had done its work well. It had removed Galen’s cuts, cured Shaw’s burns, and sealed the ear piercing that the fayleene prince had suffered at the hands of an overzealous ranger from the California Department of Fish & Game. I’d taken back the stud earring I’d bought Liam to hide the hole, once it would no longer stay in.

“Okay, that’s a problem,” I sat back on my heels. “I’m not sure what we can do about it.”

To my surprise, Liam threw a nervous glance towards Galen before responding. He gingerly stepped back and forth for a moment, his hooves making clacking sounds on the chamber’s stone floor.

“Dayna, I would be dead, or an outcast without you. You’ve given me the only family I’ve ever really known. So I must ask a boon of you.” And with that, Liam bent his forelegs and turned his head to give me a sweeping bow. “Would you be my consort, to be at my side when I enter the Sacred Grove?”

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Chapter Two

Galen kept his expression carefully neutral. Shaw's beak dropped open and he stared in surprise. Me? I'm just glad my own jaw didn't hit the floor when I heard that.

"Liam…" I breathed, "Are you asking me out on a *date?*"

"No! Well, yes. In a way. I mean, I don't think of you in that manner, not really. It's just for the duration of the ceremony!" He got up, and then added, "I spoke about this with Galen last evening when I first heard the rumor about the Protector. He suggested–"

Galen crossed his arms and cleared his throat ominously.

"I mean, *I* suggested that since he'd managed to transform an equine body into a human one, that perhaps he could do the same for a human…into a fayleene form."

"And you agreed to this?" I demanded, rounding on Galen.

"It was a most fortunately timed request," the Wizard replied. "I was just transcribing the details of my transformation spell, the one used both by Magnus and myself to pass as human. The spell for human-to-fayleene is remarkably similar. In truth, it is somewhat easier, given the balance of mass between an adult human female and a fully-grown doe."

"Well, I'm glad that Liam gave you the motivation to solve one of your academic problems," I groused. I got up and began to pace. "But if the law specifies that only fayleene can attend, then I don't think that using a transformation spell is quite…I don't know, *kosher*."

"To be precise," Galen intoned, "the exact words of the fayleene law states that the only persons allowed in their Sacred Grove are 'those who bear the noble countenance of the deer'. To my mind, this only bars creatures who are not in fayleene form."

Great. The one time Galen is able to untangle a legal document, and it's not in my favor. I stopped pacing and thought this through for a moment. Liam was my friend, one who'd stepped up to save my life at risk of his own. He wouldn't have asked this of me unless he were

well and truly desperate. And in truth, a part of me was curious about what visiting the fayleene – from an inside perspective, so to speak – would be like.

"What about an illusion spell?" I asked. "Wouldn't that be easier, in any case?"

"That is possible. But fayleene have finely attuned senses, including that of smell. They would pick you out at fifty paces."

"Liam," I said, and he tilted his head to look up at me, "won't I be picked out anyway? No one will recognize me, it'll be obvious that I'm not part of the...herd, I guess."

"You will attract some attention," Liam admitted. "But recall: many fayleene choose to live near to but separate from the Lead Does, just as I. In fact, given my time spent in exile, it would be expected that I'd have found a consort who also chose to stay apart."

I turned back to Galen. "What if you mess up the spell? Or you can't change me back?"

"Perish the thought!" Galen's nose wrinkled in offense. "I have performed Archmage-level magic before, and without erring in the slightest. As to changing you back…if I were indisposed, you would change back in stages over the next few days on your own."

"Over the next few days? That sounds…painful."

"And acutely embarrassing," he agreed. "Which is why I will handle the return to your true form. I assure you that it shan't be any more difficult than cantering down a grassy lane."

I let out a breath in resignation. I trusted Galen with my life. Hell, I trusted Liam and Shaw with my life too. And again, that part of me that was twelve years old grabbed me by the back of the collar and said, *Come on! This will be fun! Haven't you always wondered what it would be like, to be a magical creature?*

I nodded in the affirmative, and Liam tapped his forehooves in a little dance of delight.

"Just tell me what I need to do," I said.

And that brought me back to the present. Liam had told me how, in the strict matriarchal structure of the fayleene that the newly visiting doe was not to speak to other members of the herd unless

spoken to first. Galen had instructed me to avoid eating anything at all for the entire night prior to his casting the transformation spell.

Neither of them had told me that I had to strip down to my skivvies. Or told me just how damned cold it was going to be in the Fayleene Woods. I kept these thoughts to myself as Galen turned the next pages in his spell book, but I didn't plan on staying quiet much longer. Getting half-naked and chilly was kind of comical. Hypothermia wasn't.

"Ah! There is the final phrase I require," Galen said, cracking a smile.

"Then thou hadst better use it," Shaw observed. "Our friend Dayna seems to be turning a most pretty shade of blue."

Galen shut the book with a snap and put it away in one of his saddlebags. The Wizard held his arms up, shouting his incantation in his deep bass centaur voice.

"*Tá mé ag casadh tú isteach i fianna anois! Beidh tú ag spraoi a bheith ina fia!*"

A circle of yellow fire winked into existence between his outstretched hands. A bright, burning cadmium yellow, the kind you'd see dabbed on a freshly painted oil portrait. The heady smells of blooming night jasmine and campfire ash flowed from the circle as it began to spin like a strobe light on a dance floor.

The circlet of fire rose from the centaur's fingertips. Then it flattened and shot towards me. I flinched, squeezed my eyes shut and felt my skin crawling, rippling, as the magical energy coursed along my arms, my legs, my belly.

A black nova of sensation burst in my brain. The tangy smell of pine-wood sawdust. Taste of bitter salad greens. A flash of colors behind my eyes. I felt my legs give way, felt myself falling forward onto my long, long forearms.

Felt myself pitch onto all fours. But I was still standing, somehow. My eyelids were still squeezed tightly shut. Breath whistling out of my lungs like I'd just run the fifty-yard dash.

"Dayna," Liam's voice called, "are you all right?"

I raised my head. Opened my eyes.

Gasped at what I saw. What I heard. What I smelled!

It snapped me all the way back to when I had been in seventh grade. When I got to do my very first dissection. The frogs my class worked on had been packaged in a formalin solution that smelled hair-curling awful. Since then, I've built up a tolerance for the worst scents. But the fact remained that I had an exquisitely tuned sense of smell, one that I had to tame and discipline myself to use.

Right now, deep in the Andeluvian woods and inside a fayleene body, all my self-taught mojo vanished. For a few seconds, my head reeled with sensory overload, as if I were deep-sniffing a fistful of permanent markers while staring directly into a strobe flash.

"Glah!" I exclaimed coherently.

"Dayna, I think you need to give it a moment." Liam's voice sounded richer, fuller, like someone had just gotten around to turning on the center channel on the speakers. His words rippled down my ears, making them flicker like a rabbit's. Strange sensation, that.

"I…wow," I said, sounding like a half-baked stoner. "This is wild. Is this how…you fayleene see the world?"

"I suppose so. I mean, I really don't know anything different."

My eyeballs finally stopped with their visual tap dance and settled down. The colors didn't, though. Everything around me looked super-saturated, as if someone had turned up the gamma correction on an old computer monitor to maximum. The single dark green of the forest had split into multiple shades and hues. The golden sunlight gleamed brighter, making my eyes water. And my friends looked different as well. Different, in the sense that someone had liberally smeared each one of them with fluorescent blue ink.

Shaw's wings were outlined in a fuzzy aquamarine glow. Galen's jacket and forelegs were a blur of blue-white daubs. Bright cyan lines shone from across Liam's flank, like racing stripes done up in black-light paint.

"I'm not sure," I remarked, as I tried to steady my voice. "But I think that fayleene see further into the color spectrum than humans. And the smells…"

I took a few more breaths, working and tasting the air that

circulated up my new, longer nasal passages. The fayleene's forest had a distinctive, peppermint scent that lay over the usual woodsy smells of bark, moist earth, and decaying leaves. At least that was the way it smelled to my poor human nose.

But now, it was like I'd wandered onto the manufacturing floor of a candy-cane factory. I had to force myself to focus. Envisioned grasping a dial in my brain, turning down the sensory impact with a *click-click-click* until I could cope. It took a few moments, but I finally got things under control. My friends looked relieved, meaning that my facial expressions must have finally gotten beyond the oh-so-fashionable 'brink of a nervous breakdown' look.

I managed to stand up straight. Felt the long, ruler-straight bones of my legs move into place. A slight tickling along my torso. I shook off my human underwear from where it dangled, uselessly, from my torso with a little shimmy and took a step or two forward. My head felt a little unbalanced from the weight of my antlers. Like reindeer, both fayleene genders had horns perched atop their skulls.

I half-turned to look at myself. Saw my spotted flank, my powerful hindquarters that tapered to slim, hooved legs, and a powder-puff white tail.

"What do you guys think?" I asked.

"It appears that my transformation spell has been an unqualified success," Galen said, with a note of pride.

"I agree. Wholeheartedly!" Liam breathed.

Shaw grunted. "Meh. 'Tis a look that makes one appear…of lesser intelligence."

Liam shot a glance at Shaw and let out the closest thing to a growl I'd ever heard from a deer creature.

"But the form is extremely…tasteful!" Shaw added hurriedly.

"That's enough, you two," I said, as I minced forward a few steps on my new legs. "Prince Liam, we'd best be off before we miss the ceremony."

"That much is true," he agreed, and his annoyed look was replaced with one of anticipation. "If you would be so kind as to follow at my flank?"

I went to Liam's side as Galen declared, "Shaw and I shall abide here until your return. Best of luck to you both!"

Yeah, I thought, *Something tells me we're going to need it.*

Liam set off into the underbrush, and I followed him. In a few moments, our companions faded from view behind us.

The woods pressed in around us more closely, wreathing us in a combination of tall piney trees and a tangle of low-lying scrub. And yet, even with the antlers projecting from my head, I could follow Liam between, under, and through anything that could have caught us or tripped us up. Our hooves drummed out a muffled beat as we wended our way along miniscule forest paths carpeted with mint-scented pine needles.

"You've managed to figure out our gaits quite easily," Liam complimented me.

"That's because I'm not thinking about it," I explained. On cue, I stumbled a little and mumbled a curse under my breath before continuing. "I'm just letting the body do the work. If I think about it, *then* it becomes a problem."

"Ah. Well, then. Keep on 'not thinking' about it. We're about to join the others. Remember what I told you about my people's customs."

A dull thrumming reached my scoop-shaped ears. The sound of many other hooves trotting on the needle-cushioned earth around us. Our path abruptly merged with that of others, and the underbrush fell away to reveal a multitude of fayleene couples, each travelling in the same direction. The males were pretty much quiet, eyes fixed on their goal ahead, while the females chatted amongst themselves.

At first glance, the does all looked roughly the same. Each had delicate muzzles, dense, fawn-colored coats spotted with white, and sharp black hooves. But upon closer inspection, I noticed small but telling differences. The larger does, ones with eight or more points on their antlers, did all the talking, while the younger ones remained silent. My mind cast back to what Liam had told me, of the matriarchal structure of his kind: *do not speak unless spoken to.*

Maybe it was for the better. The chatter that I did hear, as soon as

the more mature does caught sight of me, was as bad as a bunch of catty women looking to take a new arrival down a few pegs. The fact that we were on the move didn't seem to matter in the slightest. The old biddies just tore in with the subtlety of a school of piranha.

"Oh, look," one said, "Prince Liam managed to bag himself a stand-in for the event."

"Bag? More like 'beg'! I don't recognize her," another observed.

"She's probably the one who begged to come," a third *tsked*. "I can see why someone drove her out of the herd. Pitiful choice really. Not fit for a princeling."

"Even as one as wee and broken as Liam!"

A chorus of strange, bleating laughs. Liam's jaw set firm and he ignored the comments. Of course, they immediately started back in on me. Yeah, the fayleene might have been beautiful magical deer, but up close, they were a bunch of harpies with cloven hooves.

"Oh, this one thinks she's a pretty flower, does she not?"

"Puh-leze. Just look at those antlers! It's obvious that she's had some work done."

"And I bet those white spots on her flank wash right off after sunset!"

Another titter of laughter. One which was drowned out by a male voice, one that was smooth as silk and yet carried the unmistakably arrogant tone of command.

"Ladies," said the voice, "Let us be kind to our newcomers. I, for one, am genuinely curious as to who Liam managed to corral for this function."

A new pair of figures emerged from the brush beside the trail to join us. The slighter figure was a young doe, who threw me a glance laden with a clear 'keep your hooves off my man' warning. As to the larger figure…

Liam let out a resigned sigh. "Hello, Prince Wyeth."

Wyeth didn't so much as acknowledge the greeting as he came into view. I wasn't into fayleene, no matter the body I wore, but this specimen was enough to put a hitch in a girl's breath. I'd said once before that Liam looked more than a little like Bambi. But Wyeth

looked *exactly* like the Disney character – the version from the last act of the film, when the fawn had grown up into a handsome stag. His body was a lean slab of dun-colored muscle, perfectly proportioned, and crowned with a glorious twelve-point rack of antlers.

I could see someone sculpting this creature's form into the hood ornament for a Rolls Royce. Or sketching his likeness to put on a wine bottle's label. But once I'd listened to him for a few minutes, I'd have preferred that some hunter had shot him and mounted his head on a wall.

"Well, now," Wyeth pronounced, as he craned his neck to look at us. "I am surprised. Not only does little Prince Liam have a pretty doe following in his wake, I can't make out the leash he's using to drag her along!"

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Chapter Three

“Leave us be,” Liam said flatly. “We’re not bothering you, are we?”

“As if you ever had a choice in the matter.” The large stag fell in beside me, and I abruptly became aware of his muscular bulk. Liam was only a little bigger than me, in this form. But Wyeth’s barrel chest was easily double the width of mine, and my eyes only came up to the middle third of his neck. He stared at me for a moment, and let out an amazed snort.

“Now it all makes sense,” he muttered under his breath. “I should have known…”

“Wyeth,” Liam gritted in a frosty tone, “I’m warning you. Leave my consort alone and attend to your own.”

Again, the large stag ignored Liam’s words. He continued to stare at me in amazement.

And I’d had just about enough of this.

“Look,” I appealed to Liam, “that’s got to count as ‘being spoken to’. Because I’m getting tired of this nonsense.”

“Ah,” Wyeth announced, his voice thick with sarcasm. “You do speak, pretty little doe.”

“Well, that last bit definitely counts as being spoken to,” Liam grumped.

“Good.” I canted my head back to look into Wyeth’s impassive, coffee-brown eyes. “I do speak, and I’d like to know where you picked up your winning attitude. Liam’s traveled to the court of King Benedict and Fitzwilliam, saved hundreds of lives, traveled to another world, and captured the mad wizard, Magnus Killsheven! Tell me, Wyeth: what have you done with your life besides nibble on tender shoots, drink from forest pools, and shag the occasional doe with extremely bad taste in her choice of studs?”

I think my shot must’ve hit home, as the surrounding does recoiled as if I’d bucked and kicked at them. A few hushed words to

their male consorts and the other couples picked up the pace, leaving us behind. Wyeth, for his part, gave his own doe a nudge with his muzzle, urging her on. Once she'd trotted ahead, out of earshot, Wyeth gave me a final once-over, as if deciding where to jam the point of his antlers into my hide.

"Prince Liam's not the only one who has contacts in the human realm," he said quietly. "I know who and what you are, Dayna Chrissie. And I know that you're the daughter of a fayleene murderer!"

That stopped me. I traded a startled, horrified glance with Liam.

How the hell did this son-of-a-buck know?

"Oh, yes," he went on, "a few words from me at this very moment, and bucks here would tear you apart. A few words from me a little later, when we're in the Sacred Grove? The Lead Does themselves would flay your fayleene skin from your human flesh!"

"Never," Liam declared, as he interposed his body between me and the larger stag. "They could try. But they would have to go through me first."

Wyeth's face took on an amused look. But his voice remained as serious as ever as he sniffed, "I don't need to prove my power that way. When I take our father's place as the Protector of the Forest, I'll be gracious. Just this once, I'll forget that you've committed such a blasphemy. Consider it my gift to you, runt of a princeling."

With that, Wyeth bounded forward out of sight.

I rounded on Liam in an instant.

"Hold on a minute! That arrogant, ill-mannered jerk of a stag… he's one of the Protector's sons? We are talking about Quinval, the all-powerful Protector of the Forest?"

Liam let out a snort of his own, this time. "That's typically how it works in monarchies."

"But–"

"For obvious reasons, it's important to ensure that the Protector's line goes on. Thus, Quinval has long had the right to mate with as many of the Lead Does as he wishes, so long as they consent to the breeding. So Wyeth, myself, the other fayleene princelings…we're all

brothers or half-brothers."

"That means…that you're as much a son of the Protector as any of the others," I said, understanding.

"True. Not that the family connection counts for all that much. My 'brothers' shunned me just as the rest of my people did, all those years. But Wyeth is something different. He's the eldest of Quinval's get. He's always been the biggest, the most aggressive. And he's always felt that gave him the right to lord his gifts over the rest of us."

"It shouldn't give him any right."

"Yet it seems to. It's long been assumed that he would take over for Quinval someday. And he's pushed himself, trained himself to be the fastest, the strongest. Ready to take over as soon as our father started to teeter into old age. It's admirable, I suppose, but his abilities make it hard for him to understand what it's like for others not as lucky. I understood this best at the time of my accident."

"When you broke your antler, escaping a dragon."

"Even so. I limped back to the herd, burned and badly hurt, hoping the does would show mercy and treat my wounds. It looked like they were going to. I think they were. But Wyeth drove me off into the wilderness. Said that if I were meant to survive, I would prove it by doing so. And so I did."

The young princeling's voice trailed off. His face gave nothing away, but his gaze remained fixed on some point immeasurably far off in space and time.

"Liam, I can't imagine what it must have been like, having him for a brother. But we don't get to choose our family. Sometimes we just… need to try and find the good that's within them."

A moment passed, then two. He looked at me, eyes pleading.

"How do I do that, Dayna?"

"I don't know. But we all have to try, at least."

A rush of voices filled my ears, making them flick back and forth. I let out a gasp as Liam and I stepped into a vast, green cathedral of space. Trees the height of California redwoods arched overhead, creating a vaulted ceiling of branches. Dots of sunlight filtered through, dappling the crowd of fayleene couples below. Off to one

side, a line of older, gray-spotted females watched in regal silence as the newly arrived fayleene sorted themselves out around the huge oval of the clearing.

At equally spaced intervals on the forest floor lay a quartet of wide, flat leaves shaped like lily pads. Atop each leaf were small heaps of seeds, nuts, and a dark, chunky substance I couldn't quite make out. But there were other things competing for my attention at that moment. Chief among them was Wyeth's voice, raised in outrage and sorrow.

"No! By the sacred heartwood, this cannot be so!"

He raced forward, stopped, and stared into the shimmering veil of gold light that lay across the very center of the Grove. I recognized the shimmer as Liam and I drew closer. He also let out a cry of dismay, followed by similar shrieks and howls from the other fayleene around us.

The shimmer came from a preservation spell, one meant to slow or stop decay. I'd seen one before when I examined the body of Good King Benedict. Walking through the magical shield hadn't been a pleasant experience, but I could attest to the fact that it had kept the corpse fresh.

It looked like it was working now, too.

Resting peacefully under the golden shimmer was an elder stag. His coat was a shiny, healthy slate gray. But his eyes were closed, and his chest did not rise and fall.

"Liam…" I breathed, "Is that who I think it is?"

"Yes," he said, and his voice came out in a croak. "That's my sire, Quinval. The Protector of the Forest lies dead before us."

All of a sudden, I had a really, *really* bad feeling about all of this.

The Protector of the Forest lay peacefully under the preservation spell, as if in some dreamless slumber. Quinval's legs lay folded beneath his gray-haired torso in the exact same pose I'd seen cats assume when they wanted to keep their paws tucked away for warmth. His long neck stretched out before him, eyes closed, letting his head loll on the ground in a manner that would've been pretty uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, that is, if he hadn't already been dead.

And the real kicker? He wasn't the first dead fayleene I'd seen.

It was the reason that Liam's half-brother Wyeth had shocked me earlier. One winter, back in rural Illinois around the time I was seven years old, I'd been out wandering the woods behind our house. That's when I came across a trail of blood droplets in the crusty snow that wended its way through the trees and back towards my house.

I'd followed the track up to the side door of the garage. What I saw when I opened that door would baffle me for years afterwards. My father, who'd been out hunting deer that day, knelt sobbing in front of the open chest freezer. Lying in the freezer like so much raw meat was a doe, a doe with ten-point antlers. My father confided in me the horrible events of that morning: he'd shot a deer, and afterwards, just as she died, she'd spoken to him as clearly as one human being to another. He begged me to keep what happened a secret, and I did.

Afterwards, I would dream about that very day. But time acts like thick fog sometimes, smothering details, the sure feelings of memories. I'd never been quite sure if what took place that winter was one-hundred percent real.

That is, until I came to Andeluvia to solve King Benedict's murder. Until I learned that both a severely wounded wizard, Magnus Killsheven, and that poor fayleene doe had somehow arrived in my world. And my father had pulled the trigger that had killed the innocent, unknowing being of fey magic. A pang went through my chest as I realized that what Wyeth said was true: my family had murdered a fayleene in cold blood.

Very few people in this world had known about it.

Or so I had thought.

Around me, in the present, the fayleene continued to let out bleats and cries of fear, dismay, and outrage. Until one of the Lead Does got to her feet and spoke in a booming, resonant voice that cut through the cacophony and stopped it cold.

"Be at ease!" she intoned. "No matter if you are buck or doe, first-yearling to the Grove or a seasoned attendee, this is a special time. A time of endings, of remembrance, and new beginnings. What has

happened is truly sad, but as night must pass for morning to break, so too do we honor and respect the memory of our Protector."

"Mistress Orlaith!" Wyeth's smooth tones echoed in the abrupt silence. "Who is responsible for this outrage? I would gladly lead the way to exact bloody vengeance upon all who–"

"Did I not say to 'be at ease', princeling?" The Lead Doe named Orlaith cocked an appraising eyebrow in response. "Your words are hot and rash when none are needed. Three days before, the Protector was found as you see him now. There was no sign of violence. No sign of hostile magic. He has simply gone to sleep, the sleep of the long dark followed by the awakening in the fallow fields of the Great Beyond."

A general murmur of discontent ran through the assembled fey deer.

"But this…this has never happened before! The death of our Protector leaves us without a senior stag to mentor his successor!" Wyeth paused for a moment, and I'll be damned if he didn't tilt his head back and raise a foreleg to strike a theatrical pose. A couple of the younger does in the crowd let out delighted gasps and titters. "The younger, chosen stag, though I am *sure* he'll be truly worthy of your choice…how will he learn the deeper magic of the forest as he ascends to his well-deserved throne?"

Orlaith's tone came across as more than a little frosty now. "We are well aware that this has never happened before, princeling. Many things that have not been seen under this world's sun are yet again making themselves felt, that much is true. We have allowed for this in our choice, and as we weave the spell to anoint the one slated to succeed, the rest of you must feed. Feed upon the delicacies that Quinval loved, and think naught but good thoughts of his name."

A few more mutterings followed this last announcement, but they were muted compared to before. Wyeth bowed elegantly to the Lead Does, accepting their authority. He joined his consort and went over to the set of leaves that had been placed closest to the line of Lead Does. With a glare and a haughty snort, Wyeth shoved the pair of fayleene that had already claimed the spot out of the way.

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Chapter Four

Liam had already picked out his own area, set about halfway down the length of the grove. It wasn't nearly as prime a locale as the one Wyeth had bullied his way into. But even so, he stood his ground against interloping bucks who came close enough to dispute his choice. Once every fayleene had finally found their spot in the dining (or pecking) order, we could finally turn our attention to the fare laid out for us by Orlaith and her kin.

Aromas that I could only describe as 'strange-but-mouthwatering' rose from four leaves that had been put out as a place setting. I was pretty sure that the fayleene mouth couldn't drool, because that's what mine would've done at this point.

"What are these delectable-smelling things?" I asked. Around us, other couples were diving into the food with gusto. But no matter the body I was in, I wanted to know what something was before I put my lips to it. I'd had one too many trips to places south of the border, where I'd found out after the fact that I was eating iguana, or dried beetle husks.

And then there was mouse tart. I shuddered and hurriedly filed away that memory for a later nightmare.

Liam nodded at each of the quartet of items as he spoke. "These are delicacies, the exact fare that Quinval would have dined upon. *Lomairí féir*, the seeds of the ginger-grass. *Labhras féir,* blades of the milk thistle. *Castán*, the swift-river chestnut."

"And this?" I nudged the pile of dark chunks I still couldn't identify.

"This is the rarest of all, *tafann*. The magic-infused bark of the *amidach* tree." Liam threw me a worried glance. "If these items are too strange to you, do not force yourself to indulge on my account."

"Force myself? I don't know if I can hold back!"

He beamed at that. "Well, let's partake while the Lead Does sing."

They were going to sing during our supper? But I put that question

aside as I took bites from each leaf's selection in turn.

The seeds looked dry, but they crunched in my mouth like warm movie theatre popcorn drizzled in butter. Not the ersatz stuff you got out of a nozzle, but butter churned right down home on the farm. The thistle leaves smelled like bushels of ripe peaches and tasted like romaine lettuce. I got a meaty, portobello-mushroom vibe from the chestnuts. And the tafann had a flavor I just couldn't describe: dark and rich as chocolate yet spicy-sweet as cinnamon candy. To drive the 'magic-infused' point home, the air around me began to twinkle with adorably pink sparkles of light as I nibbled my way through the dish.

Throughout the meal, the Lead Does did indeed sing for us. At least, they did what the fayleene apparently thought of as 'singing'. Each of the senior females stood, closed their eyes, and emitted a single note that resonated throughout the clearing. They held the note, only shading it into the next at minute-long intervals. It reminded me of a recording I'd once heard, a ten-minute *Ohhhmmmmm* done by a group of Tibetan monks.

The deep thrumming set up by the does was strangely relaxing. It combined with the natural 'high' I was getting off the tafann and put me into a slightly meditative state. Liam, like many of the fayleene in the Grove, had taken on a relaxed look and swayed slightly on their skinny deer legs.

Me, I used this little bit of mental-clarity time to look at the former Protector's body a second time. Call it a bad case of professional curiosity.

From where Liam and I sat, I was able to get a good look at Quinval's left side. My first impression, that he looked at peace, still held up under scrutiny. His dense coat of hair had gotten a little ruffled up in spots, but in no way suggested that he had been in a fight.

After all, why couldn't his death have been due to natural causes? I mentally chastised myself a bit. Not everyone dies under mysterious circumstances.

No, Quinval may have looked old, at least from the silvery-gray tracings on his coat and around the edges of his muzzle, but

otherwise? He was the picture of health. In fact…

Wait.

The silver tracings of his muzzle were so prominent in part because his nose and lips were a shiny, velvety black. That made me frown a little as I looked around. None of the other fayleene had nose or lip colors so dark, at least from what I could see. It wasn't an age thing either. The older Lead Does also had the exact same colors. The black of their noses and lips was that of soft coal, or velvet. But only the Protector's tissues had the rich black sheen of an oil slick.

Quinval's left foreleg also looked odd. It was off just a tiny bit, as if the joint was too big or set too wide by a quarter-inch from his frame. I looked down at my own foreleg, flexed it to check my impressions. I couldn't move my leg to make it look like that, but what did that prove? I wasn't all that experienced in this body. Quinval could've been double-jointed.

Maybe I was starting to see things that weren't there. Being a medical examiner was, in a way, a state of mind. My brain could be looking for and creating patterns that weren't there.

Liam let out a gasp. All around us, the air had taken on a thick, fluid quality. An entire rainbow of psychedelic colors swirled through the clearing, rippling in time with the tonal changes from the chorus of Lead Does.

The song's volume grew and grew, pressing into my fayleene eardrums with tangible force. The fayleene in the Grove were rapt, riveted on the swirls of light and sound that swept among them like a hot desert wind. The hairs all over my body pricked up, stood at attention as the melody drew to its climax.

The does' singing stopped in mid-phrase. Energy crackled through the atmosphere in the Grove. As one, the does opened their eyes. As one, they lay down their pronouncement.

"As keepers of the Sacred Ways of the Fey Magic, we have chosen!"

A hundred pairs of antlered heads lifted in anticipation. Up in the front ranks, the pair belonging to Wyeth quivered with anticipation.

"Do we fayleene so pledge to honor the will of the stag who shall lead us through the darkness and into the light?"

The answer came in unison, an excited shout. “We so pledge!”

“Then he shall come forth and claim his destiny! Step forth!”

More excited shouts as the fayleene pranced in place, working themselves into a lather.

“Step forth!” they called, “Step forth!”

“Present yourself and your consort before us: PRINCE LIAM!”

Silence and shock brought everything to a crashing halt.

I turned to Liam, who looked as thunderstruck as I felt. Somewhere off to one side, someone let out a nervous cough. And just to drive the point home, far off in the distance, a couple of crickets began to chirp.

“I…I mean…we had better go up there,” Liam whispered, and he made his way through the maze of assembled fayleene, doing his best to ignore their unblinking stares. I followed as best I could at his side.

I noticed that most of the stares were ones of bewilderment. A couple of neutral curiosity. And a sizeable number were outright hostile. Obviously, the assembled fayleene didn’t care a whit if we heard what they were whispering to each other.

“He has no luck! He has no magic!” said one.

“They chose that yearling over Wyeth!” another objected.

“Madness, this is madness!”

“Could he have influenced the Lead Does somehow?”

“He’s too small and frail for this duty!”

The murmurs began to creep up in tempo as we emerged from the crowd. Like the rise of an incoming tide, the rumbles from the crowd finally reached the point that not even the Lead Does could ignore it.

Orlaith’s commanding voice boomed over the assembly. “Silence! After much debate, we have chosen Prince Liam. That is all you must know to heed and obey! To disobey the laws of fey magic leads one to despair, madness, and ruin!”

I heard a strangled sound from the front rows that seemed to come from Wyeth. I couldn’t be sure, though. From where we stood, he was somewhere behind and to my right.

Orlaith made a motion with her antlers. “Step forth, Prince Liam!”

I hung back as Liam came before the older doe. He bent his

forelegs and turned his head to give her a sweeping bow. She bade him rise, and then spoke again, this time in that same booming voice as before.

"Liam, you have been chosen before all others for this task. But before you assume the full mantle, the full magic, and the full privileges of the Protector of the Forest, you must prove yourself worthy."

The princeling's voice wavered unsteadily as he asked, "But how? With the old Protector dead, how must I do this?"

"You shall swear an oath that is binding upon your very soul! An oath that you shall act as the heart and soul of our proud people. Say 'I shall', if you so swear to take up this burden."

Liam stood firm and proud. "I shall."

"Say 'I shall', if you so swear that you shall spread your wisdom and grace to all corners of our realm."

"I shall!"

"Say 'I shall', if you so swear that you shall handle any challenge or threat to our people!

My ears pricked up a little at that one. That phrase sounded like it could turn around and put someone in a bunch of hot water.

But Liam was caught up in the moment, and he did not hesitate in his answer.

"I shall!"

"Then as the senior Lead Doe, I declare you as the Protector's Heir Apparent! Beings of magic, beings of the wood, grant unto him the first measure of his new power!"

Now, I was darned amazed at what it felt like to be a fayleene. Even more amazed to find out that they acted like high-schoolers with their put-downs, cliques, and gossip. And I was just plain floored that Liam got picked as the 'Heir Apparent'.

But the only thing that got my delicate fayleene jaw to drop was what happened next: pairs of blue and yellow songbirds flew from out of the branches of the nearby trees, carrying swathes of bright green cloth in their claws. They swooped in and decked Liam out in jewel-encrusted barding across his slender back and atop his head between

his antlers. Someone drew back a few carefully selected tree boughs, allowing the sun to bathe the new Heir Apparent in light. The jewels in Liam's outfit sparkled with emerald fire.

Look, I'd seen an owl fly in and crown King Fitzwilliam. But this? Let's just say that if a certain palm-sized fairy in an avocado green one-piece flew in to tap Liam on the nose with her pixie dust wand, it wouldn't have surprised me.

The senior Lead Doe spoke once more, this time to the mass of assembled fayleene before us. "All of you have joined us at the dawn of a new time. A new cycle in the rebirth of our people. Go forth, and consider how you shall serve."

The sounds of the crowd of fayleene leaving the Grove echoed in the space behind me. Liam fairly trembled with excitement. He came over to me, his new outfit emitting a jingle with each step.

"They chose me!" he exclaimed gleefully. "They actually chose…I mean, I never would have dreamed it! My luck isn't all bad. In fact, it's never been better! I can feel new magic within me now, new strength in my bones!"

Orlaith chose that moment to join us. She chimed in with a voice that was softer than her commanding intonation. But it was cool, calculated, and utterly indifferent.

"It is well that you feel your new strength, princeling. You will need all of it as you leave us and plot out your stratagems."

Liam blinked at that. "Come again?"

"I said that it is well that you feel your new strength–"

"Yes, yes. That part, I got. What about the 'leaving' and 'plotting stratagems'?"

"Why, you must leave us to gather your allies, form your plans, and prepare your most cunning stratagems, princeling. It is, in the end, why we chose you. For even though you lack the necessary magic of the fey, even though you lack the stature to be a true hero, you do have qualities required at this moment. We felt that because of your deficiencies, you have developed the ability to deal with the centaurs, griffins, humans, and other lesser beings."

Liam tried to speak, sputtered to a stop, and tried again.

“You picked me…for my *deficiencies?* So that I could work with… well, for what purpose?”

“To slay the great and fearful Sirrahon, of course. The ancient stone dragon who draws nigh to our borders as we speak. Upon handling this threat, you shall be anointed as the Protector of the Forest. Should you fail, then your death shall pave the way for a worthier successor.”

And with that, Orlaith spoke a few more words to her sister does. They each came forward and bowed to Liam in turn. Then they bounded into the forest, leaving me and Liam alone in the Sacred Grove.

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Chapter Five

Liam led the way back through the tangled woods. I trailed in his wake, my mind awhirl with all that had just taken place. We hadn't spoken since the Lead Does had left us. And in truth, I couldn't think of what to say.

The path from the Sacred Grove was similar to the one we'd arrived on, but it was taking longer to return to the starting point. Liam still wore his jewel-encrusted ceremonial outfit, and he was trying his best not to let it get scuffed or torn off by projecting vines and brambles.

As before, the mint-scented pine needles muffled the beat of our hooves. But off to our side came a loud, crackling sound. The sound of something blundering through the underbrush with all the grace and subtlety of a boulder rolling down a steep slope. Liam halted, eyes slitted in a dark frown. I came to stand at his side just as Wyeth came crashing through the last of the brush.

Liam's half-brother stood before us, but the proud figure that could have graced the hood of a tycoon's touring car had been subtly transformed. As if someone had taken his image and twisted it, knocked it off kilter. His fawn-colored flanks heaved with each heavy, rattling breath. Blood oozed from a multitude of scrapes along his face and side, marks of the many brambles he'd stumbled through. His forelegs shook with a deep, muscular twitch that disturbed me almost as much as the look on the stag's face. His noble features were distorted by the dazed way he moved his head, as if he'd heard a sound that was too loud for his eardrums to handle.

"Prince Wyeth," Liam said in greeting.

"Don't…" came the reply. A shake of the head, and then, finally, Wyeth's face shook off the worst of his shell-shocked expression. "Don't! Don't you dare refer to me by that title!"

"There is no shame in your honorific," Liam said quietly.

"There is, if it is the wrong one. And it is wrong, this is wrong! I

should be the one wearing the Heir's barding! I, not you! I was the one who trained for this. For my whole life! This is what I was meant for, what I was born for! And now you…you who know nothing… have the nerve, the gall, the audacity to plunder my destiny!"

"I didn't ask for this." Liam stated plainly. "And you? You are the one who knows nothing. The price the Lead Does ask of me is higher than you might think."

"Don't lecture me about price! You didn't run the length of our forest, pushed your body until your heart swelled to burst and your lungs burned! You didn't give up warm nights with a willing doe to scale the highest peaks of our woods under the summer moon! You never learned to use the fey magic in ways that could burn one's mind, scorch one's brain!"

"You're wrong, Wyeth. I too learned to cross the same length of our forest. Not at your speed, no. But I learned how to do it in pitch blackness, because I had no companions to help light my way. It's true that I never gave up nights with a willing doe, but I did give up many nights of sleep to find something, *anything*, to fill my empty belly during the winter. And I never learned to use the fey magic the way you have. If I had any luck in my life, it was only recently that I discovered it. With the humans, the centaurs, the griffins – all the 'lesser' beings with whom I befriended. Outside of this close-minded world that you seem to be so enamored with."

"You dare–"

"Why not? I'm the Heir now, and my word is law. So I'll forgive you your unkind words to me. Just this once. And if you wish to take my place…I will *give* the position of Heir to you. Freely."

"Give me?" A shiver ran up the length of Wyeth's flank from tail to neck, and then shot up to his head. Spittle sprayed as Wyeth began to shout. "*Give me?* To forever mark me as the grateful little buck who was given the gift of power by the runt princeling? Even if the Lead Does permitted such blasphemy, I would throw myself off the northern cliff's rampart before I receive your charity!"

"I'm sure Liam could recommend the right cliff for you," I said under my breath. Wyeth was well into the process of working himself

into a lather, so he didn't hear me.

"I don't know what foul sorcery you worked," he cried, "but you have fogged the good sense of the Lead Does, you've befouled our very name by placing a human inside of our fair form, and you've disrespected our people by bringing her to our Sacred Grove!"

"Enough!" Liam demanded. "Stop it, before you say something you'll truly regret."

"I don't regret any of my words. Or my deeds!"

Wyeth let out a hiss of anger, like a hot tea kettle. His back legs pistoned and he leaped forward. Liam was ready, and met him in mid-leap. Their antlers locked with a tooth-jarring crash and a knock of bone on bone that echoed from the distant hills.

The clash only lasted a second or two. Liam lacked a full antler on his left side, which allowed Wyeth to bulldog him around to the right. This turned Liam's face towards me, and his face was stern, unyielding, even as he gave ground.

Liam's cloven hooves flexed, dug deep into the soft forest loam. Smell of wet, damp earth. A whisper of sound in my ear, a hint of magic. Liam snorted, his breath a hot jet of air, and tossed his head. A gritty *scrape* as he heaved his opponent back a full three steps and their antlers parted.

The two stags glared at each other. Wyeth looked shocked, amazed at how far back he'd been pushed. Liam's ceremonial headdress hung off to one side, partially blocking his vision. He shook it off in annoyance and it fell to the forest floor with a jingle.

"Go ahead, denounce me to the Lead Does!" Liam snarled. "The task they've set before the Heir is a death trap, and I'll be more than happy if they revoke my promotion!"

"What good would that do? No, your lies and treachery have corrupted them beyond hope! How else could they have chosen a fawnling like you over a stag like me?" Wyeth shook his head violently. "You're not the only one who knows how to survive on his own, and you're not the only one with access to powers beyond his forest. Mark my words, and mark them well: I will make sure that your task ends in ruin! I'll see you dead, or driven off into the

wilderness again. Blind and halt-footed, this time!"

And with that, Wyeth dove into the thickest part of the underbrush. He disappeared in the blink of an eye, in the way that only the fayleene could. Liam looked grimly the hole that his half-brother had punched through the greenery.

"I'd never thought of Wyeth as having the sharpest antlers in the herd," he remarked, and his voice grew bitter. "But I underestimated the thickness of bone in his head. If he'd chosen to listen, he'd have figured out that this dragon 'Sirrahon' might well take care of things for him."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I said hurriedly.

Liam pawed absently at where his headdress had fallen to the forest floor. The bright jewels glimmered through the layer of dust that coated them now. He turned to face me, almost shyly. His eyes were fever-bright and on the verge of tears.

"Dayna…" he whispered, "I didn't know! About any of this! I…I never wanted to become the new Protector, never dreamed that my people would do this to me…"

I let out a sigh. "Yeah, I figured that. Just our rotten luck."

"I don't know the first thing about how to fight a dragon!"

"Well," I said carefully, "I don't know if that's completely true. You did encounter one as a fawn, and you did survive with the loss of an antler."

"I fled from it, evaded it, yes. But that is a far, far cry from what the Lead Does ask of me now."

"There were two more. The ones that came after Galen and I arrived in your forest, the very first time."

"I hardly played any part in–"

"Yes, you did," I stated firmly. "Liam, you did more than you give yourself credit for. You saved my life. I don't think you know how grateful I am for that."

He shook his head. "You and Galen killed those dragons. Not me. I wasn't able to do more than keep it distracted until you turned the tides of battle."

I considered that for a moment. When Galen and I had shown up

in the Fayleene Woods the first time, we'd been shadowed by a pair of dragons, each the size of a Piper Cub airplane. And it hadn't been some random encounter. The dragons in question had been trained hunter-killers from the stable of Captain Vazura, the leader of the Andeluvian Air Cavalry.

Former leader, that was. He hadn't murdered the Good King Benedict, but he'd known about the murderer's identity and had latched on to his scheme to gain glory. On top of that, the man was a sexist pig who hated my guts. So you could say that it had been something of a grudge match.

Galen had been able to hold one of the dragons off, but only while I distracted the other and figured out a weakness we could use to turn the fight in the Wizard's favor. And then only with Liam's help had the second dragon been trapped for me to kill. But Liam was right about one thing: alone, not one of us could have prevailed.

So there was only one way forward, when you came right down to it. In a way, it was strange to see that the Lead Does were right. That Liam's strengths flowed from the friends he had made in the worlds outside the Sacred Grove. He'd saved me once. And I'd refused to turn my back on him when all looked doomed for him. Galen and Shaw had both pitched in and saved him at my side.

I put on a serious face. Well, as serious as a deer face could look, anyway.

"When it comes to killing Sirrahon…I guess this is something we're all going to have to learn. Together."

Liam looked at me, puzzled. Then his face brightened like a child's on opening the biggest, shiniest present on Christmas day.

"You mean it?"

"You know I do, Liam. I'm your consort, aren't I?"

He fairly glowed at that. "So…what should we do first?"

I lowered my head, used my mouth to grasp Liam's headdress where it had fallen. Then set it back upon his head as straight as it was possible, without hands.

"I'm not sure yet. At least about the dragon part," I allowed. "But you know what I told you earlier? About how we need to try and find

the good that's within our family?"

"Yes?"

I gave him one of my trademark wry looks. "Forget I said anything."

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Chapter Six

We emerged from the depths of the woods and into the bright glade where we'd started early that morning. By now, the sun stood close to its zenith, and it cast a golden glow over where Shaw lay dozing on the grass. His tail twitched slowly back and forth like that of a giant housecat. Next to him, Galen leaned against a handy moss-covered boulder with his nose buried deeply in a book. My bra and panties had been hung neatly on a low-lying branch of a nearby tree, right next to the rest of my clothes.

"Grimshaw," Galen intoned, "it appears that our companions have returned to us."

"Eh? 'Tis time for the noonday meal already?" Shaw mumbled, as his eyes perked open. The griffin got to his feet. He proceeded to do a feline stretch that would have made a yoga instructor jealous, and then did a double-take as he spotted Liam's outfit. "Attend, Wizard! Not all of us have returned as commoners, methinks."

Galen gave him a puzzled look. "Perhaps I am unclear of your intent."

"Art thou a creature of the court, or not?" Shaw approached us and knelt before Liam respectfully. "I, at least, recognize the heraldry and sigils of the ascended."

The centaur closed his book with a snap and then trotted over to join us. "Mayhap this is true? What went on back at the grove?"

"It's true," I acknowledged. "The Lead Does have selected Liam as the Heir to the Protector of the Forest."

"Even after Prince Liam himself thought that he was unsuitable?" Galen hesitated, and then made a sweeping bow. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise and an honor, your majesty."

"Cut that out," Liam said, annoyed. "And I don't want to be addressed with any title for now. Believe me, this is nothing to celebrate."

"I'm afraid that I've gotten off on the wrong hoof today, then. I

see no downside."

"Then you need to look harder." Liam's headdress slid askew again, and one of the tassels batted him in the eye. With a shake of his head, he half-slid the piece off, grabbed the dangling bit in his teeth, and tugged it free. He held the scrap of royal cloth between his clenched teeth and added, "Dayna, please tell them!"

"The Protector of the Forest wasn't stepping down," I explained. "He's dead."

I got a startled exclamation from both griffin and centaur over that one.

"Dead!" Shaw exclaimed. "Was his death fair or foul in nature?"

"The Lead Does say it was 'fair', but I'm not so sure," I admitted.

Liam set his headpiece aside on a nearby stone and then looked up at me. "You think it was foul play? Why?"

"I don't know. It's just a few things about the Protector's body… they didn't look quite right to me. But that's a forensic examiner for you. Give one of us enough time, and we'll see a murder in every death. I've got no proof beyond a bad feeling. But that doesn't matter all that much. Whether the death was 'fair or foul', Prince Liam was the one who walked away with the crown."

"And I'd gladly give it up," Liam declared.

"Truly, 'tis a mad world that I live in!" Shaw exclaimed, with a birdlike squawk. "How is it that I knowest not one, nay, but *two* heirs to a kingdom's throne...and neither wish to embrace their duties when their people call?"

"In my case, the people hardly 'called' for my ascension," Galen pointed out. "If you recall, I received the kingship by knocking my father unconscious with a blow from my fist."

"A call to duty hath many ways to summon thee," the griffin insisted. He cocked his head for a moment at Liam and added, "But what is this? The fayleene looks to have grown a few inches, or mine eyes have indeed grown tricksy with age."

The Wizard and I turned our attention back to our cervine friend. And sure enough, Shaw's keen attention to detail was exactly right. I'd been roughly Liam's height when we'd arrived at the Grove. Now, I

was looking up at him. And his left antler was still little more than a bony nub, but it too had grown a couple of inches, and smoothed out its jagged edge.

"I think Shaw's on to something," I remarked.

"There must be," Liam agreed. "Once I was crowned Heir, I felt… charged somehow. Like the very woods themselves were sending me energy. I feel stronger. More potent, magically."

Galen immediately stepped forward, his ever-present curiosity aroused. "In what way? How has it affected your spell casting?"

"Let me see." Liam closed his eyes and concentrated. Again, that same tiny whisper of magic that I'd felt as much as heard, when Liam had clashed with Wyeth – and thrown the bigger, heavier stag back.

A cloud of bright blue jays, yellow-crested kinglets, and rainbow-sheened songbirds materialized from the nearby trees and swooped in, serenading the Fayleene Heir with their song. A dozen of the jays grasped the barding on Liam's back and carried it off, while another half-dozen did the same with his headdress. With a whirl of color and a final trill of song, they flitted back into the trees as quickly as they came.

The griffin's tongue flicked from his beak and he exclaimed, "How marvelous! Thou canst summon *snacks* now!"

"Shaw," I said, "stop with your teasing."

"I wasn't speaking in jest! T'was a very useful form of magic, in my opinion."

Galen cleared his throat before Liam could add his two cents and get the argument rolling. "Speaking of useful forms of magic, it is time to turn Dayna back to a human. Unless, of course, she's found the fayleene form such to her liking that she wishes to remain a doe for a while longer."

"No, thank you!" I threw Liam an apologetic look. "No offense, Liam. I like the enhanced senses, but I've got a meeting back in Los Angeles this afternoon. They're going to look at me funny if I arrive like this."

Liam chuckled. "I understand. Though in truth, I will miss seeing you in this form."

I went to stand next to the tree where all my clothes still hung, as if from an evergreen clothesline. Galen spoke a few sentences of magical incantation, and a golden circle of light began to form overhead. It grew slowly in brightness, like a fluorescent lamp that was just warming to the task.

"The spell returning a subject to their original form is much less dramatic," Galen explained. "In the next minute or so, the light will envelop you and allow your body to revert back to the one of its birth."

I nodded, shifting back and forth on my cloven hooves in anticipation. I hadn't been kidding when I told Liam that I liked the enhanced senses. But aside from the fact that the fayleene were a bunch of snobs – with the occasional psychopath like Wyeth thrown in – I couldn't wait to get my human hands back. Among other things, I needed them to pick up freshly brewed cups of coffee.

My three friends continued to watch as the shimmering light slowly grew in intensity. And right then, believe it or not, a thought occurred that made me blush.

"Um, guys?" I said. "When I change back to human, I'm going to be naked as a jay bird."

My three friends traded a puzzled look between themselves that all but cried out: *Do you know what Dayna is talking about? Because I don't have a clue.*

"Yes," Galen acknowledged. "Typically, jay birds are without clothes."

"Well, it's kind of…embarrassing for me to be without clothes in my human form."

"Why?" Liam asked. "You see us without clothes all the time."

"That's different."

"And you're without clothes right now, aren't you?"

"I said, that's different!"

"How?"

The shimmering light began to peak in intensity. "It just is, okay?

"Truly, 'tis a strange notion," Shaw added. "While human haunches are not as tasty-looking as those of a fayleene, certainly one

wouldst–"

"All right!" I barked, at the top of my lungs. "Everyone, *about face!*"

As one, the three swung around to look in the opposite direction.

"Goodness, I think we offended her," Galen remarked.

"That, and someone got up on the wrong side of the meadow this morning," Liam whispered.

"Thou speakest true!" Shaw whispered back.

The golden light engulfed me with a soundless flash. A moment of disorientation, the crawling feel of my flesh reshaping itself, and it was over. I got up from my hands and knees, reeled for a moment as I rejoined the ranks of bipeds. The forest and the sights around had shifted back to a monochromatic shade of green, and the sounds were duller, fainter.

But the biggest change?

It was damned cold in the forest again.

Shivering, I grabbed my undergarments first, pulling on the panties first and then slipping the bra hooks into place with trembling fingers. I went for my dark blue Eileen Fisher pants and blouse next. Not the most stylish, I know. But they were comfortable, and I knew for a fact that they'd keep me from losing a pinkie toe or something to frostbite. Luckily, my trio of oh-so-understanding male friends had begun discussing Liam's situation again. That would hopefully prevent them from asking why my teeth were chattering.

"–and just because I am the Heir, there is no guarantee that I will become the Protector," Liam was saying. "There is a foe to the fayleene to be vanquished first. An ancient stone dragon by the name of 'Sirrahon' threatens my people. And since I am sworn to handle any challenger to my people…"

"You have placed yourself between a rock and a rather hard spot," Galen concluded. He folded his arms in thought for a moment and then added, "There is nothing that remains but to help you in this quest. Dayna, by chance have you concluded this as well?"

"Thou must say 'aye', Dayna!" Shaw urged. "For this is great news!"

“Great news?” I said skeptically, as I zipped up my pants and shrugged into my blouse.

“Of course! We may all yet perish gloriously in battle against yon fayleene’s dragon!”

Liam gave Shaw a sour look. “There are times that I think you need to seek help, friend.”

“Nay, we have all the chances to die right here, no further aid is needed.”

“Galen, Shaw…” I began, “I offered to help Liam as soon as I learned what his people asked of him. As for you two…since we solved the murder of King Benedict, you’re no longer beholden to me in any way. You don’t have to do this.”

“I think I speak for Shaw when I say that ‘honor demands that we assist’,” Galen said, and Shaw nodded agreement. “And even if you do not formally command us, I accept your leadership without question. We all owe you for restoring our purpose, bringing us back to our kin, and binding us together as such.”

A swell of emotion caught me right then. Made it hard for me to swallow. Maybe it was the shy little girl in me, but I was moved. It had always been a little hard for me to connect with people. And just knowing that the three creatures I’d met had truly become my friends and confidants…it touched me. I slipped my socks and shoes on and walked back over to them.

“Guys, I’m proud of all of you.” I couldn’t help but beam at them as I went on. “I need to return to my world for the afternoon, but with Galen’s help, I could return by early evening.”

“You shall have no problem,” the Wizard agreed, as he half-turned to reach into one of his saddlebags. He rummaged around for a moment and then pulled out a small circular amulet on a silver chain. Galen pressed it into my hands as he went on. “I have enchanted this medallion with a quartet of magical charges. These power the spell that allows you to cross between our worlds. Simply envision the spot you wish to travel to, and it shall enable your crossing. Once you have used its four charges, bring it to me and I shall make the spell anew.”

“Thank you, Galen. I only wish that you could give me something

to handle my meeting this afternoon. It's not bound to be pleasant."

"A meeting with that oafish man, Deputy Chief McClatchy, I presume?"

"The same. And I can't skip this one. Remember, I'm still on probation so far as the LAPD is concerned. McClatchy didn't like my cutting out during an investigation into a murder and attempted assassination. But in the interim…we need to know how much time we have, and what we're up against."

"I can handle the first part of the problem," Liam suggested. "The new fey magic I've received since becoming Heir…it allows me to do more than summon birds. If I concentrate, I can pick up on what many of the forest creatures are sensing. I'm sure that I can figure out a way to use them to find out how close this Sirrahon is, and how fast he's coming on."

"That's exactly the kind of info we need. As for the creature itself, well…there are dragons, and then there are *dragons*. Maybe this one is old and feeble enough for us to beat. Do we have any resources, references, or guides we can consult on this 'Sirrahon'?"

"I know naught of dragons," Shaw admitted. "But the elders of my kind may be able to tell me more. Shouldst I take wing now, ere the fall of evening I should be able to return."

"And of course, I have access to King Fitzwilliam's royal libraries," Galen finished. "An old creature like Sirrahon will surely have been thoroughly documented. When you return, where shall we meet you? In the corner tower room?"

I chewed my lip for a moment before answering. One of our leads would likely turn up the information we needed. But if not…it was better to have a backup. A backup which I hoped that I wouldn't have to use.

"No," I said. "When I return, it will be to the antechamber outside of the throne room. I've got a hunch that we're going to need a favor from the new ruler. And of course, I'll need an audience with him if I'm going to get it."

"You wish to ask a boon of King Fitzwilliam? What in the world can he give us for this task?"

I smiled grimly. “If all else fails, he can get us a person. A person I’m betting knows more about this Sirrahon than anyone else in the kingdom.”

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Chapter Seven

The spell Galen had concocted to send me back to my world was familiar to me now. But it still wasn't exactly what I'd call 'pleasant'. I held the picture of my living room steady in my mind, and then squeezed the medallion that hung on a chain around my neck. Instantly, I found myself dumped back into a sea of eye-searing white static. Smell of ozone filling my nostrils, jamming itself down my throat with the sour taste of burning plastic.

I landed with a jolt that nearly knocked me off my feet. I stumbled on the sandy brown edge of my living room carpet and managed to grab the arm of my couch to steady myself. The ozone smell vanished, to be replaced with the homey, domestic smells of lemon-scented furniture polish and potpourri.

Ever since my place became the 'landing pad' for travel between my world and Andeluvia, I'd made a couple of small changes to the room. For starters, given the flashy way one could enter and exit, I kept the blinds down and the curtains drawn shut over the windows. I'd also kept all the flat surfaces like the mantle and desktops clear of anything heavier than a newspaper – Shaw's half-spread wings had shown me that to do otherwise was inviting trouble.

And finally, I'd cleared the place of excess furniture. Not only did it give more space should heraldic creatures arrive, it was also safer. The night I'd returned from Fitzwilliam's coronation, I'd stumbled off the carpet and came within an inch of barking my shins on the closest coffee table.

I thought about meeting with the new king as I went to the bathroom to wash up and then prepare for a different battle in my business attire. My unease grew as I rubbed a warm, moistened towel over my face, dried off, and went to the bedroom. Fitzwilliam was the legitimate heir to the murdered Benedict, and he'd seemed friendly enough at first blush. Better yet, he'd fawned over my aquamarine colored dress at his coronation, commenting on how the piece

matched my eyes and set off my black hair. But I still didn't really know him as a ruler per se. It was one of the reasons I'd remained on the fence regarding his offer to remain in his kingdom as the court 'forensic examiner'.

So I didn't know how he'd react to a request from me. Especially one that could be upsetting to him. And me, for that matter. My stomach gave a churn, as if to emphasize the point. I gave it a mental command to settle down as I selected a business jacket and pants. Both articles of clothing had the oh-so-sexy color of mesquite charcoal briquettes, and were completely impractical for work in the chiller room. But they matched, and it made me look professional on a day when I was more likely to be sitting in a meeting room than a morgue.

The freeway gods of Los Angeles chose to go easy on me for once. I got onto the 101 freeway in that blissful time between the lunch hour traffic jams and the evening crush. I made a mental note to sacrifice a can of motor oil or something as a 'thank you' as I pulled off on my exit. A few minutes later, I buzzed my way through the security checkpoint and was on my way to my broom-closet of an office when the roiling in my stomach turned into a full-bore cramp.

I winced, made it to my office door, and put my hand against the knob. I closed my eyes and breathed deep, willing things to settle down. This was a little odd, as it was completely off cycle for the menstrual hijinks my body played at the right time of the month. Plus, the pains weren't in the right location.

A bright, happy voice cut through my misery. "Dayna, there you are!"

Shelly Richardson, the senior M.E. and my longtime friend, came marching down the hallway to join me. Shelly and I had taken different career paths at the LAPD. She'd stayed with the medical examiner's office while I moved over to crime-scene examination as an independent contractor. But we'd always been close, and I think she felt a little motherly towards me. She had a body that Reuben would've thought paint-worthy, a poufy frizz of light brown hair, and eyes that twinkled behind a pair of stern-looking pince-nez glasses.

"I'm here, all right, but part of me isn't enjoying the experience," I

admitted, and she put her hand out to touch my forehead for a moment.

"You're not feverish or anything," she remarked in her soft southern drawl. "But you're looking more than a little green 'round your gills."

And, believe it or not, that set my nausea alarm off again. As I lurched down the hall to the ladies' restroom, it did flash through my mind that I'd coined the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending) to rate a given situation's grossness. Apparently, the bad karma I'd earned from all the times I'd put people off their lunch was coming back to get me.

I made it to a stall, barely. Then I went ahead and placed a collect call to God on the big white telephone. Of course, when it was done, it wasn't white anymore – and Miss Slow Learner finally figured out what was going on. The bright green and brown mess came from the enchanted food I'd eaten this morning. Only it had been fine on a fayleene's stomach, not a human one.

One flush and mouth-rinse later (actually, a half-dozen rinses followed by an old breath mint fished out of a handy pocket), I stumbled back to my office. Shelly had taped a piece of paper to my door with a single image on it: an arrow pointing to the left. That made me feel better for the first time since walking into the building, as it was our old way of saying 'come by my office'.

Shelly's space was only a dozen yards further down the hall. As usual, her door had been left propped open in welcome. She looked up from where she'd been typing on her computer as I came in and settled into the plush chair at the side of her desk. I exhaled gratefully as she finished up the email she'd been composing. Shelly's office was larger than mine – or at least, it felt larger – and next to her computer she'd stacked what she called 'all the comforts of home'. A totem-pole of electrical appliances sat in a stack from the floor on up: a squat compact fridge made up the base, followed by a drink dispenser, topped with a microwave, and capped off by a coffee maker.

"You look a world better," she remarked kindly.

"I feel better. Something disagreed with me." Shelly had met and

then promptly swooned over Galen when the Wizard had transformed himself to look like a rather hunky human male. She wasn't fully aware of Andeluvia's existence – which was how the people there wanted it – so I kept mum on that note. For her part, Shelly wasn't one to pry much, except when it came to my welfare.

"I'd say that it didn't set right at all. What in the world have you been eating?"

"Bark, leaves, and grass."

She nodded sagely. "I told you to stay away from that vegan place down the block. They got shut down by the county for health violations last winter, and frankly, I doubt they've improved things a whit."

"You always have my best interests in mind," I said honestly.

"Then take my advice and put a little soup on that tummy of yours." Shelly took out a container of soup in a microwavable cup, popped it open, and put it into the second appliance from the top for a quick dose of radiation. In less than a minute, she removed it and handed it over to me. "Creamy tomato. I find it's a non-contentious sort of food."

"Mmm," I mumbled, as I took a grateful slurp. "Thanks. I'll need a little fortification if I'm going to speak to our esteemed Deputy Chief. I just wish he'd drop the whole thing."

"You're not the only one. That corpse we picked up, the one that kicked off this whole mess? We never did match up the prints. And no one stepped forward to pick up the body. I filed it as a 'cold case' a few days ago."

I looked away as I took another long drink of soup. That body never would be ID'ed, since it came from someone who'd never been born on our world. Shelly knew that there was more to the story than I let on, but again, so long as she figured I was safe, she was willing to do me this favor and let it slide into red-tape oblivion.

"Your going AWOL last month made McClatchy look foolish," Shelly continued. "And that's one man who has a thin skin."

A soft *rap* came from behind me. I half-turned to see Detective Alanzo Esteban standing in the doorway. As usual, the gap-toothed

grin and appreciative hazel eyes that shone from the homicide detective's copper-bright face said that he still carried a torch for me, of sorts.

"If you're talking about our favorite *diputado* being thin-skinned," he ventured, "maybe we'll all get lucky. He could cut himself shaving and bleed to death."

I let out an amused chuckle at that. Shelly rolled her eyes, but she waved at Esteban to join us. He perched himself on the edge of her desk as he went on.

"I'm afraid that I'm the bearer of bad news today. McClatchy sent me down here to tell you that he's rescheduled your meeting for tomorrow morning."

"That doesn't sound all that bad," I said, though I was a little annoyed at having dressed up for nothing. Plus, I'd hoped for a longer stretch of uninterrupted time to work on Liam's problem.

"Not at first, maybe. But I'm hearing through the grapevine that he's busy trying to dig up more dirt on you. And he's not going to just talk with you – he's calling a formal probation hearing. If I were you, I'd be ready to answer some tough questions tomorrow."

I groaned. If I had to be truthful that very second, I'd have said 'screw all of this, I'm upping stakes for Andeluvia'. But I couldn't do that. Among other things, it was one thing to move cross-country or even to another country. It was a completely different thing to be severing – or at least limiting – ties with the world you were born into.

"Damn it all," I groused. "Friday morning just got ruined for me."

"Maybe," he agreed sadly, and then beamed a shy smile my way. "But afterwards, how about doing something to cheer yourself up? Say, by making good on that Friday evening out on the town that you keep promising me?"

I gave him a look that was one part amazement, one part objection. Not a single word got past my lips. Esteban knew more about Andeluvia than Shelly – he'd actually met Grimshaw the griffin, for starters – but I hadn't had the opportunity to tell him much of anything after I'd brought Benedict's killer to justice.

That said, I was torn. We hadn't gone to bed or anything, but on the one date that we'd managed to consummate, we'd steamed up the inside of his vintage Plymouth Barracuda. He'd still been in the middle of restoring the thing, so our make-out session had been liberally scented with the aroma of fresh primer, but I hadn't complained. In fact, it made my skin goose-pimple when I thought of how far down my front I'd let him kiss me with those hot lips of his...

"Oh, gosh darn it!" Shelly said, with a snap of her fingers. With a voice that dripped sincerity, she added, "I think I left one of the bone saws running on the slab. Can't let that happen, you know. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I glared at her as she left. Shelly believed I didn't date nearly enough in order to find the perfect man. She was probably right, but she also thought that Galen was giving me some action on the side – something that would be anatomically difficult-if-not-impossible in his real form.

"Believe me, I really want to go out this Friday," I pleaded. "But this is a really bad time."

He sat back and appraised me. "It's been a 'bad time' for almost three weeks now."

"I know, and that's not fair to you. It's just that I can't leave a friend in the lurch." I hastily sketched out Liam's problem for him. I decided to leave out my transformation into a deer. I especially left out the part where I had gone as Liam's consort. Esteban was already a little jealous of Galen, and I didn't need any more complications on that front.

Esteban frowned as I finished my story. "Wow…this guy Liam, did he break a bunch of mirrors as a kid or something?"

That made a laugh bubble up from my chest, one that I really needed. I got to my feet, took a last swig of the soup, and tossed the container away in the trash can by Shelly's desk.

"Depends how you define 'luck'," I said. "If Liam hadn't been taken hostage in the first place, you might not have gotten that first date from me."

"There is that. But I do need to know one thing. Something that's

been on my mind for a while now since that whole thing with 'Benedict' was resolved."

"Alanzo, this 'Liam' is magical, but he's still a white-tailed deer! There's nothing that could possibly happen between–"

Esteban stood up and came over to me. His masculine scent, overlaid with the smell of cologne, tickled my nose. He put out his strong, calloused hands and rested them gently on my shoulders.

"Dayna, those people, those…beings that you work with? They came here for you. They needed your help, and you solved their problem."

His eyes bored into mine. Gently for now, but underneath the soft brown there was a frightening hardness like granite. For the first time since I'd known Esteban, I wondered what it would be like sitting in custody when he came to interrogate me. If he thought that I was a murderer.

I didn't even kid myself that it would be a pleasant experience.

"Yes…I solved their mystery. Cracked the case, put it to bed."

"Now you're being asked to come back and solve a new case. I'm guessing that they need you. And they'll keep on needing you, won't they?"

"It's…possible." I'd never mentioned Fitzwilliam's job offer to Alanzo.

Esteban struggled with himself for a moment. Like he was trying to put something back into a box that was reserved only for his time on the job. He put his hands down, took a step back from me.

"You have to do what's best for you, Dayna. I'm patient. I'll wait some more. But don't give me hope when there's none to be had."

And with that, he turned on his heel and walked out of Shelly's office.

Leaving me feeling like I'd just gone ten rounds with Bob McClatchy.

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Chapter Eight

Time went by as I sat in Shelly's office chair. I don't know how much. Maybe it wasn't that long, but I spent a good part of it rubbing my temples like I'd picked up a stray migraine and taken it home. My stomach did feel better, but it was far from completely settled. My emotions were what had been jangled, though. The switcheroo pulled off by the Deputy Chief had affected me more than I had thought it would. Plus the idea that my friend Liam – the only loyal, kind fayleene I'd ever met – was in terrible danger made my insides crawl.

And now Esteban had dropped a depth charge of insecurity into my lap. I didn't need that on my plate. Not now, not ever. I mean, I wasn't averse to dating. I liked men, I enjoyed sex, and I loved curling up with a warm, hard male body in bed.

Maybe that was part of my worry. If Esteban walked away from me, or I left for Andeluvia…who was there that I could see myself with, romantically or otherwise? I wasn't about to start dating outside my species. Even if Magnus – when he'd been wearing Duke Kajari's face – had sort of turned my head. But every other man I'd met so far had either been a) a part of the investigation into Benedict's murder, b) a real dirtbag, or c) both.

I tamped all that down as I heard the tap of someone's heels coming down the hallway. Whoever it was, she was whistling 'Dixie'. I sighed to myself. Shelly meant well, but she wanted Harlequin-approved romances for her friends, and she was about a subtle as a Mac truck in her approach.

"Well, now," she said, as she made her way past me and back to her seat. "When are you all going to send out the wedding invites?"

"Shelly!"

"Just kidding with you, hon."

"Well, as it happens, Alanzo and I aren't going out for a while."

"What? Why not?"

"It's a couple of things," I hedged. "The big one is…well, maybe

this whole thing with McClatchy has me spooked."

"Hmph." She reached into one of her cabinets, came up with a second microwavable container of soup, and proceeded to nuke it. "Well, that's understandable, I guess. You know, I hear tell that McClatchy's got the heart of a little boy."

"He does?"

"Yep. In a jar. On his desk."

"That makes me feel oh-so-much better." I rubbed my temples again until the microwave bleeped that it was done. "What is with him? Why does McClatchy always act like he's got an IV pole jammed up his rear end?"

Shelly picked up the heated container and settled back in her seat. The now familiar scent of tomato-cream floated my way as she took a couple gulps of warm soup. When she spoke next, I almost missed what she said.

"It was better when he first got here," she said quietly.

That made me pay attention. A bunch of questions leaped to mind, but I'd known Shelly since I'd come to the LAPD from Chicago and she'd been kind enough to show a new kid the ropes. And I knew that she'd make her point in due time, if I was patient enough to keep my mouth shut and my ears open.

"Maybe because he didn't have the rank," she went on. "Maybe he didn't get bit by that bug everyone seems to get out here. The kind that makes you hunger for power. When I arrived here years before you showed up, Bob McClatchy was just a mid-level bureaucrat. A socially awkward, kind of pushy guy, but he wanted to make good.

"He gravitated to me because we both supported the creation of a specialized forensics department. If the plans worked out, he'd be sure to get the lion's share of the credit." Shelly paused to take another sip before adding, "The irony of it is, neither of us foresaw that forensics would be moving out of the 'Labs n' Slabs' wing and out to the crime site itself. Which is where specialists like you started to come in. But at the time, Bob came to me for advice. Even for stuff that wasn't work related. For example, he used to ask me for horse-related information when he started dating this blonde bombshell of a

woman, one who was part of the show-jumping circuit in Beverly Hills."

I couldn't help but interject. "Bob was dating someone…and came to you for information on the woman's *horse?*"

"Sort of. He wanted stuff to talk about so he'd be able to impress her, not look quite so out-of-touch."

"But…why'd he come to you?"

Shelly let out a soft laugh that made me think of sun-drenched peach orchards and warm pecan pie. "Because he knew something about me you don't. Before I got into the medical examiner game, I used to be a big-animal vet. It's not something I tell folks, because then I get a mess of questions that annoy me. Around here, people always want free veterinary advice on why their precious little kitty is acting neurotic, and I don't do house pets."

Suddenly my brain did one of its weird little *clicks*, and things began to snap into focus. I sat up, leaned to one side, and looked out into the hallway. It was empty. So I closed the door, took a breath, and then took an even bigger chance. My friend was a devout, Church-every-Sunday type of Christian, and I wasn't sure how much she was going to believe. I spoke slowly, cautiously, and hoped she didn't think I was putting one over on her.

"Shelly, where I've been going…it's really another world. It's the one where…you know, my friend Galen is from."

"You mean heaven," she said, without a trace of irony or condescension.

"I'm not so sure you could call it heaven."

She shrugged. "I'm willing to accept a lot more than you might think. But the way I figure it, Galen was some sort of spirit guide, some sort of angel. And that means that God's placed the both of you on the path of some grander purpose."

"I suppose…well, I can't really argue that. Maybe there is some grander purpose, and I'm being tested right now. But this test, this problem? It's tied to my friends, ones like Galen, and I'd really appreciate your expert opinion on something."

A nod of agreement. "Okay, run it by me."

“Earlier today, I saw a dead white-tailed deer.”

Shelly’s face took on a pained expression. “Oh, poor thing. Hit by a car?”

“Doubtful, at least where I saw it. The body was prone, legs tucked in. In fact, it looked peaceful, with no obvious signs of trauma. If it wasn’t for a few spots of ruffled hair, then I’d have guessed that this particular stag died in its sleep. I mean, it looks like it just stumbled and didn’t get up.”

“Could’ve just been old age. If it was a domesticated animal, anyway.”

“That’s what I thought, but then I looked at the stag’s left foreleg. The part where the knee would be on a human leg…it was extended sideways about a quarter-inch too far for it to be normal. Like the joint was too big to fit there. I suppose it’s possible that this particular animal possessed double-joints, something like that.”

A firm shake of the head. “Nope. Joint hypermobility is impossible in cervines. That extra give in a load-bearing part of the body would make it impossible for them to walk, let alone run when danger presented itself. What you saw there was a distal fracture or a full-on dislocation. That’s a very serious and ultimately fatal injury for that kind of animal. Sure as heck it wasn’t a peaceful death.”

“There’s more.”

“Go on, then. This is getting interesting.” She sat back in her chair, listening attentively.

“I’m not one-hundred percent sure of the time of death,” I confessed, “but the corpse was extremely fresh. This stag’s nose and lips were an abnormal shade of blue-black, and oil-slick shiny. As a matter of fact, I’d call it a shoe-polish kind of color.”

“Sure doesn’t sound natural to me.” Shelly steepled her fingers in thought for a moment. “We did see deer in the clinic from time to time…but a broken leg, with no sign of gunshot or fall-related trauma? That could mean a seizure. Brain dysfunction caused by parasites or the rabies virus, most likely. However, whenever we saw changes in the eye, lip, or nose tissues of a deer, it always meant that something was way out of balance in the animal’s body chemistry just

prior to death."

I all but pounced on that answer. "Could that mean poison?"

"It's possible." Shelly held up a hand before I went on. "It's only one of many possibilities. To be sure, you'd have to get a tissue sample, maybe a blood sample to run through the mass spectrometer. Still, the whole idea of poison is just out-and-out ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because people who want to get rid of deer don't go around slipping arsenic into their lettuce. Depending on the state, you could be looking at a hefty fine from the Fish and Game Department if you tried to poison a sport animal. 'Sides, if you want deer out of your garden, at least back in Texas, you just get the boys to shoot them and be done with it."

"That does make sense," I admitted.

Shelly took one last swig from the soup container, and then tossed the empty into the trash next to mine. "But you got me tarred with more than a speck of curiosity now, Dayna. What makes this particular stag so important?"

"Because it's starting to make me wonder about something."

"That being?"

I gave her a hard look.

"It's making me question whether a good friend of mine is being railroaded into doing something that's going to kill him."

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Chapter Nine

My car's tires let out a screech as I took the exit off Los Feliz Boulevard and up towards my house. Mind no longer awhirl, but more convinced than ever than I had not one, but two appointments that I wasn't looking forward to. I drove up the driveway next to the sad, brown excuse of a lawn that surrounded my place and pulled into the garage.

I forced myself to take a deep breath as I watched the automatic door to roll down into place. Had to remind myself that I was a damned *crime scene analyst*. I was supposed to make judgments based on hard evidence and nothing else.

And yet…

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with how everything was turning out in Andeluvia since the Protector of the Forest had died. I got out and headed to my room so I could swap out the business attire for some comfortable dress slacks, a new top, and some flatter shoes. If I had to speak to King Fitzwilliam, I wasn't going to fool him into thinking that I was a well-heeled noblewoman. As a matter of fact, I got away with breaking a lot of the dress codes in the kingdom, simply because my clothes screamed 'woman from another world'. And yes, the flats rocked no one's world. But I wasn't about to go for a spin in my pumps, not when a lot of Andeluvia paved things in uneven cobblestone.

It took just a couple of minutes for me to get ready. I took hold of Galen's medallion and made ready to use the second of its four charges. Then thought about the long, drafty room where I'd first met Duke Kajari and the assorted nobility of what had been Benedict's kingdom. I envisioned the vaulted ceiling, the red-and-green wall tapestries, and the deep-set windows. Thought about the dark wooden table at its center, and how the edges shone with fleur-de-lis of gold leaf.

A squeeze of the medallion, and everything vanished in a swirl of

white light. The now familiar ozone stench, which defied my best attempts to block it out of mind. Followed by a jolt as I landed on the hard stone floor. I reeled like I'd had one too many Mai Tais before noon had rolled around.

"Be at ease, Dayna," came Galen's voice, as his strong, warm hand grabbed my arm to help steady me. "I'm here to support you, as best I am able."

I waited a second or two for my head to clear. Galen looked down at me with kind concern. As usual, he was the rock in this magical world that I could count on. But I hadn't missed that last phrase he'd spoken – and the disappointed tone in his voice.

"As best you're able?" I asked. "That doesn't sound promising."

He gestured angrily at a tumble of books laid out in a heap on the nearby table. One of the centaur's forehooves clacked in annoyed emphasis on the floor as he spoke.

"If there is one thing I have steadfastly admired about the human kingdoms, it is that they treat their knowledge properly. Binding them in books, storing them safely in libraries. And Benedict's realm – pardon, Fitzwilliam's realm – has always had the most complete, extensive records of anyplace in my world."

"I'm guessing that we didn't come up with much about our fayleene's dragon?"

"You misunderstand," Galen corrected me. "It's not that I came up with inadequate information. I came up with nothing, *nothing* at all about this 'Sirrahon'! And that does not make sense, Dayna. Every dragon that ever lived is recorded in text. In the records of Andeluvia's military, as a monster that had to be driven off, subdued, or killed. It is enough to drive a scholar insane."

"All right," I admitted, and put my palms down on the long table, staring at the tumbled pile of books like I could will them to tell me something new. "I feel like we just got the wind knocked out of our sails here. There must be a reason that this dragon's not in the texts. Perhaps it simply hasn't ever attacked this kingdom before, so no one has known about it."

"Unlikely. You recall, of course, the two dragons that we

encountered in the Fayleene Woods?"

A snort escaped my nostrils. "I'm not likely to forget that particular 'encounter', as you so eloquently put it."

"Those two were mere striplings, at most no more than twenty or thirty years old. As dragons mature and grow older, they simply grow bigger. Their appetite, their need and raw ability for wanton destruction – all scale up immeasurably as the years pile on."

I stared at him. "How old – and how big – do these reptiles get?"

"That brings us to the nub of the matter. No one really knows how long dragons live, or how big they might get. The oldest Andeluvian histories go back to the founding of this kingdom, more than seven centuries ago. Several decades after that, the entire Andeluvian army declared war. Not on a fellow nation, but an ancient dragon named Balaur the Black. According to legend, the dragon in question had been around for close to a millennium, and could 'thrash giant ironwood trees to ribbons'."

This discussion definitely wasn't giving me the warm and fuzzies, that much was sure.

"Furthermore," Galen continued, "despite roasting, crushing, or disemboweling half of Andeluvia's knights, the beast was brought down. Balaur was measured, and was said to be as long as 'the royal share of a furlong', which is a rather intimidating measurement."

I had to do a little mental juggling to keep up, based on my studies of Fitzwilliam's realm over the last couple of weeks. An Andeluvian 'furlong' was around one hundred and sixty yards. The 'royal share' was a poetic reference to the base tax rate everyone paid to the king, which was a fifth of any earned sum of money. So, a fifth of a furlong came out to thirty-two yards, which in turn meant…

My stomach did a little flip-flop over the number that popped into my head. Balaur would have been around one-hundred feet long. That equaled the length of three double-decker busses, or five fully grown Great White sharks. My brain refused to consider that as an accurate number. In my world, gravity put a definite limit on a land-based creature's size. That was the reason elephants topped out where they did.

“Galen…didn’t the fayleene call Sirrahon an ‘ancient’ stone dragon?”

His face took on a dour expression. “I’m afraid that they did.”

I turned away from the table and began to pace. “Then this dragon could be serious trouble. Do we have any news from Liam, or Shaw?”

“The Heir to the Protector has sent word that he’s on his way with news of the dragon’s current locale. Shaw sent me a similar message. If their estimates are correct, they should both be here within the next hour.”

“That’s something, then.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps not.” Galen studied me curiously. “Given how the odds in our favor appear to be diminishing with astonishing rapidity, should we not go to King Fitzwilliam and ask for this boon you spoke of earlier?”

That stopped me in mid-pace. I bit my lip as I considered the distasteful option ahead of me. I didn’t like this from the start, and it only got worse. As far as I knew, the fayleene weren’t a major power like Fitzwilliam’s realm or the Centaur Realm. So if power wasn’t the motive, who would have a vendetta against Liam? Specifically, who would hold a need for vengeance that was so intense, so all-consuming, that they would murder the Protector of the Forest to put Liam in danger?

My mind kept leading me back to one possibility. That it was one of the people who had benefited from the Good King Benedict’s murder. And of those, the main ones had been put into the palace dungeon. Could one of them be issuing orders from their cell? Or could one of their followers be on the loose?

Either way, it sent prickles down my back. And it made what I was going to ask even more gut-churning difficult. But Galen deserved an answer.

“Yes, we’ll go speak to the King,” I stated. “As Court Wizard, would you mind conveying me into his presence? I think your word might have more weight than mine.”

The centaur bowed modestly, but I suspected that he beamed a

little inside at the compliment. He led the way at his high-stepping trot, only ducking slightly as we went through a doorway's narrow pointed arch. Galen had been originally sent to the Good King Benedict's court as a gesture of goodwill and peace. Given his evident magical talent and even-tempered nature, he'd been promptly appointed to the position of Court Wizard by Benedict himself.

This trusted position allowed us to pass by the red and black suited guards and enter the throne room without too much of a challenge. The chamber was huge, framed by a series of ice blue marble-lined alcoves. Each alcove held a skinny window of stained glass which let in lots of light and a rainbow of bright colors.

All of which provided an interesting contrast to the man who sat upon the throne.

No one could doubt that the Good King Benedict's genes had been successfully passed on. Fitzwilliam had a carbon copy of his father's aquiline nose, high-domed forehead, and a mane of shoulder-length blond hair salted at the temples with a dash of white. His clean-shaven lantern jaw gave his face a drawn appearance, but it served to frame a masculine mouth that could twitch at one end into a catlike grin.

He wore a loose-bodied gray robe trimmed with fur from some silvery-pelted animal and studded with freshwater pearls. A heavy gold belt wrapped securely about his waist. The silhouette of a rampant griffin had been stamped on the buckle. The same design was repeated at the center of the golden circlet he wore at his brow.

Beneath the crown, Fitzwilliam's tired gray eyes roamed back and forth without focusing on much of anything. His lack of interest, wandering gaze, and slouchy position on the seat of power all conveyed the sense that the monarch was bored out of his skull.

Oblivious to that fact, the two elderly gentlemen standing below the throne's dais continued to drone on at intervals from a set of scrolls. They looked important and slightly silly at the same time. The two were dressed in fine linen, while each wore a cap that looked like it came from the Mad Hatter's reject pile. But their droning was cut short as Fitzwilliam spotted us, sat bolt upright, and cleared his throat.

“Ambassadors, we must cut the diplomatic niceties short for the day,” he said, in a clear, commanding tone. “There are urgent matters of the state which the Wizard must bring to my attention. We shall pick this up tomorrow, perhaps.”

The two men shot a disapproving glance at Galen and a puzzled one at me. But instead of objecting, they thought better of it and bowed, walking backwards out of the room. Fitzwilliam got up, put his crown aside on a velvet pillow set on a pedestal next to the throne, and gave a stretch. A small *pop* sounded from the small of his back, and he sighed contentedly.

“Thank the makers of our world that you arrived, Galen,” he quipped. “If I had to listen to one more article on our ‘favorable agreements of trade’, I would have chosen to fall belly-first upon the point of my broadsword.”

“The duties of the Crown can lie full upon the brow, your Majesty,” Galen said sympathetically.

“Full and monotonously. How on earth did my father put up with this?”

“Heavy drinking, for the most part, sire.”

Fitzwilliam let out a laugh at that. I found myself relaxing a little. The affable person I’d met at the coronation seemed to be the real man, from what I could tell. The king then shifted his attention to me, and I felt his appraising and rather forward male gaze taking in the measure of my stance as well as my bust size.

“Well, Lady Chrissie, you appear as fair as a delicate flower.” Fitzwilliam stepped forward, took my hand, and then raised it to his lips for a kiss. “Thank you for rescuing me from the rigors of diplomacy.”

I wasn’t all that keen on being called ‘Lady’ anything, let alone a delicate flower. But it was enough for me to grit my teeth and give the ghost of a curtsey in response. Galen had schooled me in the basics of court etiquette, so I could no longer claim ignorance on how to behave around nobility. Plus, I didn’t want to start annoying the man who might just become my boss.

“Sire,” I said, and damn if that didn’t sound weird coming from

my lips, “maybe I don’t understand. If the ambassadors bore you, why not delegate their meeting to some Duke or Earl who’s got nothing better to do for the morning?”

A chuckle. “Alas, that would not be respectful, in this case. These two fine fellows come from the seaside kingdom of Kescar, the realm which lost their ambassador in the same incident where my father met his end.”

I nodded in understanding. Many forgot that when King Benedict and his friend Duke Kajari were slain, so was this third, Kescarian man. Fitzwilliam was doing his best to smooth over what had to have been a major diplomatic snafu.

“Well, at least they were polite,” Fitzwilliam continued. “I had to deal with a rather obnoxious centaur delegate earlier. King Angbor has been demanding that I turn Magnus Killsheven over to him for a ‘sorely deserved’ trial and execution, with a strong emphasis on the latter.”

“My apologies, your Majesty,” Galen said, embarrassed. “My people can be very direct.”

“True, but I prefer directness to evasion. Personally, I was hoping to buy your father off with some gold to ‘forget’ the incident.” He pinched the bridge of his nose as if to stave off a headache. “I’ve seen enough death in my time, and I refuse to execute anyone who currently resides in my dungeons.”

That surprised me. Although Andeluvia was (with many important exceptions) similar to the Middle Ages in my world, Fitzwilliam had a surprisingly modern outlook on capital punishment. Galen must have been surprised as well, judging by the question he asked next.

“You would do that, even if they are a murderer, Sire?”

“Even so. Magnus remains in magical stasis. He can’t so much as blink, so I doubt that he’s a threat to anyone.” A sigh, and he went on. “I barely knew the man who sired me. Benedict sent me abroad when I was quite young, as a token hostage in a foreign kingdom’s court. I learned there that some problems can be solved with power – others not. So I hope you’ve brought me one that is the former, not the latter.”

“I hope so too, your Majesty,” I agreed, and in a few minutes, I sketched out the death of the fayleene Protector and the thorny issue of Liam’s ascension. To Fitzwilliam’s credit, he listened without interruption, though I could see that he was unimpressed.

“That’s a bad break for the fayleene heir,” he admitted. With a dismissive gesture, he added, “But I fail to see how this is any business of mine.”

I swallowed, hard. Here was the part that I wasn’t looking forward to.

“I’ve promised to assist Liam in any way I can. To help him win through his assigned task, we need information. I need someone who knows all about dragons. And the best dragon trainers in the kingdom…are the commanders of your Air Cavalry.”

“That could be problematic. Of the three commanders, one died of old age, a few months before you arrived. The second is away on a diplomatic mission across the sea and can’t be recalled until next summer. And the final one…resides in my dungeon.”

“Yes, Sire,” I said, and I bowed my head to him. “That is why I am here. To ask, to beg for a royal boon. To release Captain Vazura of the Air Cavalry into my custody.”

Fitzwilliam said nothing for a moment. He rubbed his chin as he replied, “It is strange that you should ask for this. My next meeting is with someone who is also requesting his release. I believe you know Lady Behnaz?”

My stomach twisted up anew at the mention of that woman’s name. Lady Behnaz hated my guts, in no small measure because I’d called her out on having an affair with Vazura behind her husband’s back. And that made me curious.

“Pardon me, your Majesty,” I said, “But why is the lady petitioning for Vazura? Shouldn’t she be asking you to release her husband, the Lord Behnaz?”

King Fitzwilliam watched me carefully as he gave me the answer.

“A fair question. The reason she’s not asking about Lord Behnaz is simple: I released that treacherous nobleman from the dungeon and restored him to his estates just last night.”

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Chapter Ten

I couldn't imagine the expression that must have been on my face. Of course, King Fitzwilliam didn't have to imagine. He saw it in full, after all.

"I can see that this news displeases you," Fitzwilliam noted.

"Displeases?" I said, before my voice jumped an octave. "*Displeases?* Yes, I think that's a good start!"

Galen looked at me anxiously from behind Fitzwilliam's left shoulder: he shook his head and drew a single finger across his neck. It didn't stop me, though. This was feeling all too much like a re-run. A repeat of what I went through with Magnus Killsheven, when he impersonated Duke Kajari.

"I'm starting to question why I've even bothered to put myself on the line for this kingdom!" I vented in exasperation. "Why don't we just install a revolving door down in your dungeon? It would make everyone's life a lot more convenient!"

Fitzwilliam gave me a look so chill that it stopped my rant in its tracks.

"Do you think me a fool, Lady Chrissie?" His voice had a hard, icy tone.

I swallowed, hard. *Oh, good one, Dayna! What was all that about trying not to piss off the man who might become your boss someday? Who could also order your head lopped off your shoulders if he so desired?*

"My apologies. Sire." I choked out, haltingly. "I'm from a world where things are done differently. I spoke out of turn. And out of frustration. I don't like seeing someone who was complicit in covering up Benedict's murder let loose."

That did a lot to cool off King Fitzwilliam, but a few shards of ice remained in his voice.

"You spoke out of loyalty to my father's memory, milady. That is the one and only reason you will not be spending time inside one of my dungeon's cells, or bent double over the flogging block. You would

be wise to remember that."

I cast my gaze down towards the floor. I had screwed up, but at least Mama Chrissie didn't raise *complete* idiots. I kept quiet and gave another awkward curtsey. Fitzwilliam didn't take his eyes off me, but he pursed his lips before issuing a new command.

"Wizard, wait here. I shall accompany Lady Chrissie to the guardroom outside the dungeon."

"Sire," Galen acknowledged, with a bow of his own.

Without another word, Fitzwilliam strode off, leaving me to follow in his wake. A pair of the palace guards fell into formation behind us as the king exited the throne room and turned off the main hallway. We descended four flights of spiraling stone stairs, and then passed under an unnervingly sharp iron portcullis. The king cleared his throat before he spoke again. He didn't look at me, but at least this time, the tone of his voice didn't make me think of being clapped in irons and stretched out on the rack.

"It is true that your world does things differently. Elsewise, you would easily grasp the reason for my actions. Lord Behnaz expanded his holdings by marrying Margrave Ulhan's only daughter: the woman who is now Lady Behnaz. The old Margrave died years ago, allowing Lord Behnaz to unite their lands. That land encompasses most of my kingdom's western reaches. It encompasses the woods that contain the Grove of the Willows, where Angbor of the Centaur Realm and I meet. If that were not enough, those same reaches have always been the least stable, with barons and errant knights staying just inside the laws I lay down."

I nodded and remained silent as the king paused, making sure I was still following. His voice echoed slightly as we turned down a narrower passage, one lit by torches held fast in iron brackets.

"Without a lord as powerful as Behnaz, the western reaches will soon fill with banditry, unrest, and much worse. That is a situation which any ruler worth their salt will try to avoid. So, I have returned Behnaz to his domain. I realize, as you do, that he is a snake lying in wait. One does not expect gratitude for long from such a man. But I have stripped his forces of cavalry, of griffins, and of course, the last

of our stabled dragons. So as far as I am concerned, this viper's fangs have been pulled."

He fell silent as we emerged into a large square chamber, one that looked as if it had been carved right out of the solid granite that made up the palace's foundation. The room had been set round with yet more torches, filling the air with the smoky scent of charcoal. At the far end lay a door of oak and iron, flanked by stout pillars depicting coiled reptilian creatures and two even stouter guards in dark leather surcoats and spiked helmets. Though they looked fearsome, it also appeared that they'd done one too many shifts guarding a buffet table instead of a dungeon. Then again, I didn't suppose that prison guards here had much of an exercise program.

A woman stood by the door, and the sight of her made my frown lines deepen ever more. Lady Behnaz's eyes gleamed like chips of ice, hostile and unrelenting. In the dim light, her pale skin and lank features gave her face the appearance and sharpness of a hatchet. Her gown matched the black of the guardsmen's leathers, only in velvety soft fabric. A corset-styled bodice elevated and showed off what scanty goods the woman had, likely to curry favor from Fitzwilliam's very male eye.

If that was her intent, she spoiled the effect by starting off with a near screech that echoed off the chamber's stone walls: "My liege, what is *this woman* doing here?"

"To my great surprise," he replied, "she has come forward with the same request as yours: to secure the release of Captain Vazura."

"How dare you listen to the wheedling of one such as she?"

The king raised one blond eyebrow. His voice edged back to the regal, rather pissed-off tone he'd taken once I had crossed the line with him.

"Another sign of disrespect from the fairer gender," he remarked, this time to one of the stout guardsmen. "Tell me, Jaseck: do we have flogging blocks made specifically for women? I seem to have need of one."

"No, m'lord," came the gravelly reply. "As with many of the tools of my trade, flogging blocks serve one and all equally."

I did my best to hold back a grimace. Great. At least the corporal punishment in this world was equal-opportunity. Lady Behnaz, on the other hand, gasped and did her best to curtsey as low as possible to give the king the rooftop terrace view of her cleavage.

"Your Majesty," she breathed, "please forgive my lack of care. I have nothing but harsh words for the 'lady' here. But I did not come to bandy insults with her. Rather, all my thoughts were bent towards securing the release of–"

Fitzwilliam cut her off. "Your lover, Captain Vazura."

"Lover? My liege, I only seek to free one who would seek to serve you as straight and true as a newly fletched arrow!"

As she spoke, Behnaz's very skin betrayed her feelings. A blush ran from her cheeks all the way down to the tops of her exposed breasts. I didn't know which was more pathetic, her follow-up claim or the fact that Jaseck and the other guard stood on their tip-toes trying their best to get a peek. But the king's reply made them sober up, and fast.

"Quiet, woman. I have heard so much lying at court that to hear the truth at all feels strange and foul. Your letting Vazura ride you more often than his dragon mount is quite possibly the worst-kept secret in the kingdom. I know not if your husband knows, and I care not." He addressed Jaseck a second time. "Bring Vazura from his cell."

Jaseck motioned to the second guard. Together they opened the heavy oak door with a creak of hinges in bad need of oiling. In a few moments, the crackle of the torches around us were joined by the distant slam of an iron door and the jingling of metal. Behnaz made a sound between a happy gasp and squeak as Vazura was brought out into the room, his legs bound by a length of chain stretched between his ankles.

When I'd last seen the Air Cavalry commander, he'd all but swaggered up to me, a man in complete control over his men and his destiny. All that was gone now. Though he was still muscular, the man had lost fifteen pounds. On a build as tall and slender as his, it showed. His cheeks were more prominent and his nattily-trimmed goatee had blossomed into a fuzzy bush of beard. Instead of his scarlet

commander's mantle, a ragged beggar's tunic draped over his slight frame. A smell of raw, dried sweat and stale food emanated from the man. And the easy arrogance I had once seen in his eyes had been snuffed out and replaced by deep unease.

"Your Majesty," he said, in a voice that creaked in a way that Shaw's had, when I had first met the griffin. It was the sound of a voice that hadn't been used in a long time.

"I have brought you forth because of requests that have been made on your behalf," Fitzwilliam began. "Lady Behnaz had come to plead for your release. Apparently, your choice in women strikes well, though not in the gold. For while she did loyally come to your side, she also believes that I am as witless or as willfully blind as my father Benedict.'

"My Lord–"

Again, King Fitzwilliam put steel in his voice as he spoke, pinning Vazura in place.

"At the very least, you can set store by my memory. I will always remember that you, your paramour, and your lord lifted nary a finger in defense of this realm. That you willingly let a usurper sit on the throne while my father's body was still warm!"

Behnaz stepped in front of Vazura and hurriedly knelt before the king. She grasped his hand and kissed it. "Mercy, Sire," she sobbed. "I beg of you, show mercy!"

"The mercy I showed you both is that I have not emulated my father. Captain Vazura, do you know what the Good King Benedict would have done in my stead?"

Vazura swallowed hard. "Sire, the penalty for violating the trust of a lord is death. Death and display of one's head atop one of the palace's battlements."

"Correct. And since I have not had you executed as such, then my mercy to you has been expended." Fitzwilliam grasped Lady Behnaz's hand, raised her back to her feet, and spoke flatly. "Your request for Vazura's release is hereby denied."

Lady Behnaz fell back a step as if he'd struck her. Tears streamed down her cheeks as if she awaited another blow.

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Chapter Eleven

“I am not done passing judgment on you, Captain.” Fitzwilliam stated. Vazura’s head came up. For the first time, the man noticed me, recognized me. “Lady Dayna Chrissie says that you may actually be useful to her. She has also requested your release and has vouched for you. Is that correct, Lady Chrissie?”

That was stretching things a bit. I’m not sure that I’d have trusted Vazura with a pair of sharp scissors, let alone vouch for his character. But the king was going somewhere with this, it was helping my cause, and given his mood I wasn’t about to piss him off again.

So I nodded. “Yes, Sire.”

“Then I am releasing Vazura into your protective custody. He shall follow your directives for as long as I see fit, or he shall return to his cell. You in turn shall stand by your judgment of the Captain, honor the custody, and abide by the fact that his word is now yours.”

I hesitated. This was getting stickier than I anticipated.

“Lady Chrissie,” the king barked, “you are wasting my time! Do you accept?”

“Yes, Sire!” I gulped.

“Then release the Captain,” the king said, motioning to the guards.

No sooner had they removed his leg chains than Lady Behnaz ran to him. She cried out his name, kissed his sweaty, dirty brow before composing herself. In fact, it wasn’t until the sound of hooves echoed from the hallway behind us that she disentangled herself from Vazura’s arms.

Galen had to duck as he entered the chamber. He bowed and addressed both me and King Fitzwilliam. His deep baritone echoed in a rumble off the stone walls.

“My apologies if I have interrupted any of the proceedings,” the Wizard said as the torchlight reflected off his bell-shaped silver buttons. “Both Grimshaw the griffin and Liam, the Heir Protector of

the Fayleene have arrived. They bring information for Lady Chrissie that may be of great importance to the realm."

Fitzwilliam looked over at me with a slight gesture, which I took to mean that I could speak.

"Are they all right?" I asked. "It was a long distance for both of them to travel in the time given."

"In truth, they are rather worn. The griffin in particular badly needed victuals and water after his long flight to and from the griffin aeries, so they await us at the gatehouse across the main courtyard."

"I doubt that a griffin will fit down these tunnels," Fitzwilliam noted. "And I wish to speak to the fayleene, given that Lady Chrissie's mission originates from him. So, lead the way, Wizard."

Galen bowed, and we followed in the wake of his retreating hoof beats. Lady Behnaz tried to get Vazura to lean on her, but he shook her off and moved to walk at my side.

"I owe you thanks for speaking on my behalf," he began.

"You don't have to speak with this trollop!" Lady Behnaz flared.

Vazura stopped and took her firmly by her upper arm. Behnaz gaped at him.

"No," he gritted. "You shall not. Ever. Speak to Lady Chrissie like that again."

King Fitzwilliam, Galen, and the two guardsmen watched the proceedings with interest, but did not intervene. Vazura's hand trembled as he released his grip from Behnaz's arm.

"Pardon, my liege," he said, and we got going again. Behnaz's blush had returned and redoubled, but Vazura paid it no mind. "I, too, once used the word 'trollop' to describe you, Lady Chrissie. I was in the wrong, and I apologize. No one within my earshot shall ever use that term again, lest they taste my wrath."

"Uh, thanks," I said, not sure of how to respond. I was grateful, though. "I mean, you can still just call me 'Dayna'. I'd prefer that everyone did, actually."

"You do me more honor. I pledge to serve you to the best of my abilities."

"You don't have to pledge," Behnaz pointed out, though her voice

had gentled. “King Fitzwilliam has placed you under her custody.”

“Yes, I do need to pledge,” Vazura said, as we made our way back up the spiraling stone stairs. High above us, the late afternoon sun made the walls glow. He gazed at that glow hungrily. “I couldn’t see the sky down there. That was very difficult for an Air Cavalry man to endure. And your husband, Lord Behnaz? He passed on all the blame for what happened with Magnus to me, so that he could return to his estates. To get fatter on draughts of summer wine, to sleep between cool silken sheets, and to enjoy your charms whenever he wished. I’m done with his service.”

“Surely, you are not done with me?” Lady Behnaz protested.

“No, not with you,” he reassured her. “Thoughts of you were the only things keeping me from dashing my head against the stones in my cell.”

“My love…”

“But for the time being, I shall put myself in Dayna’s hands.” We finally reached the top of the staircase as he finished with a question, which he addressed to me. “So. I am yours to command. Perhaps you can start with the basics for a poor, addle-pated soldier like me. What is our quest, where do we go, and what do we do?”

The sun had advanced far along its track and hung just above the western battlements. The gray stone framed the wide rectangle of turf that made up one of the palace’s main courtyards. Across the swath of green, next to where a squad of soldiers guarded the open gate, stood a familiar deer-shaped patch of brown and white. Next to him, sprawled out on the grass, Shaw was doing his best imitation of a dire wolf as he made short work of a freshly slaughtered side of mutton.

“Prince Liam of the Fayleene is slated to become his people’s next Protector of the Forest,” I explained, as our party continued to follow Galen across the grass. “But he’s bound by his oath to defeat a dragon that threatens his realm before he can take his title. According to the Lead Does, this is an ancient stone dragon by the name of ‘Sirrahon’. Given your familiarity with dragons, I felt you could help us–”

Vazura made a choked sound. I looked at him. The man had gone a full shade paler than when he’d been pulled out of the dungeon.

“Sirrahon?” he breathed, as if he were having trouble processing the information, “You…there is no defeating a dragon like that! All you can do is get out of his way!”

Well now, I thought, *At least he knows the creature’s name. That’s a step forward.*

“How do you know of this dragon? Galen looked into the royal archives, there’s no record of him.”

“Scholars put too much faith in the musty scent of libraries. Not every scrap of knowledge is captured in the old books! The dragon tamers of old know their own lore, and it is passed down through story and song, the way of the first Barrow-Men.”

“I know I’m going to regret this, but what did the lore say of this Sirrahon?”

Vazura looked pained as he recited, “Sirrahon is one of the eldest of dragonkind. The stories tell that his egg hatched more than three thousand years ago. And he is as aggressive as he is difficult to harm. Sirrahon is called a stone dragon because his scales are like slabs of granite. And legend has it that because of his prowess, he was the equivalent of a rising captain in their last Great War.”

“But…we have dragons too. In the royal stables.”

Vazura waved the thought away as if it disgusted him. “Our dragons are scarce two, three decades along in their growth. You and the Wizard defeated a pair of them. If Sirrahon appeared, and we could instill a suicidal sense of duty in our creatures, they wouldn’t last ten minutes. There are those who say that Sirrahon may be insane. He has been held apart from others of his kind…because he relishes killing and eating them.”

“Sirrahon kills and eats other dragons,” I muttered. “Oh, this just keeps getting better. Well, I don’t think ‘getting out of the way’ is an option anymore. We’re counting on you to figure out how to fight him.”

Vazura set his jaw. “You ask for the impossible…but I will figure out something. Because I will prove to you that I am worthy of your service, Dayna. Every dragon has a weakness, either physical, magical, or otherwise. We can find it, and we can beat him.”

“Now that’s what I want to hear,” I said approvingly. I began to ask another question, when a flicker of movement caught my eye. Up on the western battlement, something was silhouetted against the brightness of the sun. I raised a hand to block out the worst of the glare.

A dark shape stood on the battlement. It had the figure of a man, but it was vague, indistinct. It wasn’t exactly like a shadow, for within it swirled a roil of brown, black, and red. As if it were a human-shaped container of ink, dirt, and blood that had been given a healthy stir.

It raised an arm. It held something – a tube? – up at the end of its outstretched extremity, where a hand should have been.

“Look out!” I cried. “On the battlement!”

A percussive *thwip* as something tore through the air near me. A *thock!* of impact nearby, like someone throwing darts at a cork board.

“Guards! To me!” Fitzwilliam roared, as he moved towards the battlement stairs. More *thwips* filled the air. The king took about three running steps before the two guards in our party tackled him, holding their shields up in a desperate attempt to block the assassin.

Galen galloped forward, shouting magical incantations. Shaw dropped the leg bone he’d been gnawing on and took off like he’d been shot out of a cannon.

A soft, wet sound from behind me. I turned. Stared in horror.

Captain Vazura had fallen to his knees. His face swelled and turned red as if charged with blood. His lips turned the purple of a fresh bruise. Eyes bulged, whites hemorrhaging scarlet as I moved to help him. He began to fall backwards. Lady Behnaz clutched at the Captain’s arm while I tried to grab hold of his shoulder.

Vazura jerked out of both of our grasps as he began to convulse. He fell to the ground on his back, knees bent painfully underneath his prone form. Wet, choking sounds burbled from his mouth. The Captain’s head drummed twice, three times against the lush turf.

And then he went still and silent.

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Chapter Twelve

Shaw let out a lion's roar as his vast wings beat the air. In a flash, he reached the upper rampart of the palace. Claws extended, he brought one massive paw down in a powerful swipe at the shadowy figure.

The griffin's aim was true, but the blow passed through the figure without resistance. Suddenly overbalanced, Shaw smashed shoulder-first into the stony battlement. He tumbled to the rampart's walkway, stunned.

His target swirled in place for a moment, the man-figure almost slashed in half by the griffin's blow. It reformed and leapt into the air. Galen's voice boomed as he flung an arm up towards the figure.

"*Liom a heiceáil stoirme!*"

A bolt of blue lightning sizzled from the Wizard's outstretched hand. It struck the shape as it began to accelerate into the sky. The thing emitted a *crackle* like a moth hitting an electrified grid. With a meaty *pop*, it disintegrated. Handfuls of dust and debris rained down into the courtyard nearby. A rancid, sulfurous smell drifted by on the breeze for a moment before it dissipated.

A terrible cry erupted from Lady Behnaz's lips. She released her grip on Vazura's limp body. She stood and looked around with blank, wild eyes, as if utterly lost. Then she focused on me and pointed a quivering finger. Her voice shook.

"My love…he died doing your bidding!"

"He didn't–" I said haltingly, but my voice rasped to a stop. I hadn't done more than outline the task ahead to her paramour, but how the hell was I going to point that out at this moment?

"Damn you, outworlder!" she wailed. "May all your plans come to ruin!"

And with that, she ran off, sobbing. Her cries of sorrow faded and were replaced by the creak of leather armor straps and a man's groans. The two royal guardsmen that had tackled the king helped

him to his feet, apologizing profusely in continuous strings of ‘beg forgiveness’ and ‘pardon, Sire’. With an annoyed wave, Fitzwilliam shut them up.

“Silence, both of you! Are you soldiers or fishmongers?” Fitzwilliam turned to address the new company of guardsmen who had run up from their posts, Liam at their side. “I am hale and hearty, but for the bruises given by my over-zealous protectors. I want four of you at that open gate, the rest sweeping the battlements!”

As one, the red-and-black guards raised hands to chest in the Andeluvia version of the salute, then ran to do his bidding. Liam stepped forward and bowed graciously to King Fitzwilliam. With a triple beat of wings, Shaw alighted next to him and bowed in turn. The king nodded to the griffin, and then turned his attention to Liam.

“Most honored fayleene.” Fitzwilliam’s voice hadn’t returned to the angry coldness of before, but his jaw set as if he were pulling reins on a restless mount. “It seems that your troubles have suddenly expanded to include my own demesnes.”

“It does seem so, your Majesty,” Liam replied carefully. “It was not my intent.”

“Your intent does not seem to have influenced your enemies,” Fitzwilliam said in an acid tone. He next directed that tone at me. “Lady Chrissie!”

I looked up from where I still knelt by the captain’s body. “Yes, Sire?”

“You heard my words down in the dungeon guardroom. The late Captain Vazura did not ride high in my favor, as you might guess. But he was a member of the royal court of Andeluvia. One for whom you swore an oath of protective custody not five minutes earlier!”

My stomach clenched. It tied itself into a drum-tight knot as he went on.

“I shall summon a man from the *mortuarium*. To bring Vazura where he can be laid to rest in honor. As for you, Lady Chrissie? Out of respect for your work to unmask my sire’s murderer, I had not pressed for an answer from you. An answer to whether you would become the court’s official forensics examiner.” He leveled a regal

finger at me, fixed me with eyes that had gone icy gray. “But now I charge you: find me Vazura’s murderer, so that I may avenge his death as I see fit!”

His words fell on my ears like claps of thunder. Fitzwilliam turned away from me and stalked back towards the palace, his royal robes torn and smudged with grass stains.

“Dayna,” Galen said in a low voice, “what, pray tell, shall we do now?”

For a moment I simply remained where I was, stunned at this sudden reversal of fortune. I looked to my friends. Saw them waiting. For me to take charge.

I’d done it before. Though I had no idea what to do, maybe I could make it up on the fly.

What other choice did I have?

I released Vazura’s shoulder and let it slump into the soft grass. Steeled myself to do what I needed, just as whenever I’d stumbled across a particularly awful murder scene with the LAPD’s finest watching me. Though I felt as rattled as dice in a cup, I’d be damned if I let it stop me.

“Galen,” I directed, “I’m going to want to analyze the remains of… well, whatever that thing was you zapped. Go gather up the dust and whatever else you find in a bag, before the wind scatters it to kingdom-come.”

The centaur nodded, and then trotted a few yards away to begin the task. I looked at the griffin next and pointed skyward.

“Shaw, I want you airborne. Do a circuit above, see likely paths of entry for something that flew in. Then inspect the rampart. Check for scents, items left behind. Sing out if you find anything, no matter how small or inconsequential it seems.”

“Aye, gladly.” The griffin launched himself into the air.

“Liam, I need you here with me. Use your fey magic to detect and find any magical trace or ‘spoor’ in the area. Start here at Vazura’s body and then spiral out across the green.”

“Of course, Dayna,” he said. Canting an antler at me, he asked, “What do you plan to do?”

I took another deep breath to steady myself. “I’m going to inspect the body for wounds. See what it can tell us about Vazura’s death.”

With that, I turned my attention back to the captain. His body was heavy, and worse, it was indeed still warm. It gave me the shivers as I realized how far outside my element I felt.

I did my best to put my feelings aside and began my visual sweep of the body. God! Not a minute before, this had been a man who’d given me my first ray of hope in this nightmare. Now he was just ‘the body’. I didn’t come across any interesting marks or wounds on the captain’s feet, legs, or torso. I paused as a shadow fell across my vision.

Galen’s voice came from above me. “This wasn’t your fault, Dayna.”

I looked up to see the centaur looming over me. His face, with its wild, dark hair and bushy eyebrows, was sad and gentle. In one strong hand he grasped a brown cloth bag tied shut with a drawstring.

“I know,” I breathed. “I’ve never had to examine someone like this. So freshly…in fact, I’ve never seen anyone die in front of me before. And Vazura seemed so damned sure that he could come up with some way to defeat Sirrahon.”

“Mayhap that was the likely reason for his assassination?”

“As likely as the sun rising in the east tomorrow morning, my friend.” I nodded at the bag. “Not much in there, I gather.”

“Two handfuls of rock dust, nothing more. There is nothing distinctive about the collected material, at least to my untrained eye.”

“Alas, for I did not find a spoor of any kind,” Liam added as he returned.

Shaw landed with a muffled thump on the grass next to us. “I also found no scent, no trace, no objects on the parapet. Nor anywhere else.”

“Great,” I groused, “that’s singularly unhelpful.”

“Similar news I must convey,” Shaw continued. “Mine own fortunes amongst my clan were similarly full of vagaries. Yet not completely without import, methinks.”

“Let’s hear it,” I sighed.

“Upon the mere mention of the name ‘Sirrahon’, my clan’s elders acted as if they’d stuck their beaks into a hornet’s nest. Worse, they withdrew into counsel and bade me return the next day past noon!” The griffin made a disgusted sound. “Acting like mewling chicks upon a molt-day! Hadst I not seen it with mine own eyes, never wouldst I have believed it.”

“They sound frightened,” said Liam. “And while I hate to add to the ever-growing pile of ominous tidings, I don’t really have much choice in the matter.”

“Go on,” I began, and then did a quick double-take. “Liam, your antlers…”

The fayleene nodded, and then turned his head so that we could see more easily. His snapped-off left antler had not only grown another two or three inches, it had budded at the end into three stubby knobs. His right antler had also grown, though not as robustly, and it had sprouted an extra tine.

“Doubtless it is a side-effect of my inheriting the magical mantle of Heir Protector,” he explained. “I don’t know the exact workings of this magic, but it continues to be helpful. I was able to summon birds again – large, far-ranging raptors this time – and I was even able to see through their eyes.”

“What did you find out? Did you see Sirrahon?”

“Well, no…not exactly.”

Galen, Shaw, and I traded puzzled looks.

“Thou art taxing my brain,” Shaw complained. He rubbed one lion paw against his feathery head for emphasis. “Do start talking sense, fayleene.”

“The fey magic allowed me to summon a golden forest eagle to my service. A fine bird in its prime, able to fly higher and faster than anything in our world. I tracked it in my mind for hours as it sped away from the Fayleene Woods. Felt it labor to breathe as it flew over the high pass of a range of mountains, a solid fortnight of hard riding to the north. That’s where I saw…”

Liam had trailed off. I tried to nudge him into finishing.

“Yes? Where you saw Sirrahon?”

“Only evidence of his passing.” He shuddered. “Dayna, that entire northern forest…it’s *gone*.”

Galen snorted. “I find that slightly hard to contemplate. The forest you speak of is lightly trafficked, free of settlements…and it is of considerable size, if the mapmakers are at all adequate in their craft.”

“Believe what you wish,” Liam said pointedly. “But I saw what I saw. Piles of ash. Heaps of trees that had been slashed, uprooted, burned, and gnawed upon. Smashed boulders, befouled waters, and air so rank with sulfur that it nearly brought the eagle down and smothered it.”

We all went quiet at that. I thought of what Galen’s book had said about the size of older dragons. How the normally fearless griffins had recoiled at Shaw’s news. And what Vazura had said about the dread beast…

I completed my visual inspection. The only anomaly that I’d seen was the bright red-purple of a fresh bruise at Vazura’s neck. I reach out to touch that spot and my fingers encountered something hard. Something that stuck out from the side of Vazura’s neck like a picture nail projecting out of a wall.

My friends watched with intense curiosity as I carefully removed a pair of thin, brown darts from the side of Vazura’s neck. Dark red blood ran from the wounds as I did so, but it simply oozed slowly from the openings like tree sap in winter. The muscular pump driving the blood through his vessels had stopped beating.

The Wizard pulled a piece of cloth from a saddlebag and held it out. I placed the darts on the fabric and examined them critically. The weapons were dark brown, bloodstained at one end, and had been fashioned out of twisted lengths of a wiry substance. A subtle scent tickled my nose, over the iron-filing smell of blood.

Pine tinged with peppermint.

“These wiry things, could they be…pine needles?” I wondered. “No, that’s impossible. Too fragile, for starters.”

“Not true,” Liam corrected me. “Needles from the sacred pines of the fayleene grove are strong enough. And the spoor of the spellcraft used to hold these things together…I could not sense it until you

pulled the darts from this man's flesh. It is *fey* magic. I'm sure of it."

"You think these darts came from one of the fayleene?"

"If so, there's only one stag who wants so badly for me to fail that he'd murder someone." Liam pawed the turf and growled out the name. "These darts must have come from Wyeth!"

"Crafting these without opposable thumbs?" I objected. "No offense, Liam, but I don't think that someone in deer form could construct something like this."

"It is possible, Dayna. Many magical peoples can craft things in a human fashion, by using an astral, or 'non-corporeal' form. I have not mastered this skill, though I could if I tried."

"Mayhap this is the type of creature we face here," Shaw conjectured, with a flex of a talon.

"Almost as if we were dealing with a ghost," Galen mused. He snapped his finger and turned to me, eyes bright. "If we do indeed have a non-corporeal being on our hooves, it would be to our advantage if we also had one to work with us. I need to consult my books, see if I can summon assistance. Though I must caution, this task may take me all night."

"Time enough for me to speak with my clan again," Shaw said approvingly.

"And I can keep ear to ground here at Fitzwilliam's court in the meantime," Liam put in. "Wyeth recognized Dayna back at the Grove. He knew about her father's killing of a fayleene doe. I've been puzzling over that. I think someone here has been passing information to Wyeth. Maybe I can find out who."

"Then I've got my own work cut out for me," I concluded. "I want to run these pine needle darts and the handful of dust Galen collected through the forensics lab in Los Angeles. Right after that, I'll return to Andeluvia. Let's all meet back at the room in the tower at noon tomorrow."

"We shall all be here," Galen promised.

That's if McClatchy isn't able to use tomorrow morning's probation hearing to throw me out of the facility, I reminded myself. *Otherwise, my chances of solving this may have just dropped to zero.*

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Chapter Thirteen

A flash-bang of white fire, and I arrived back in my living room in Los Angeles. I'd have thought that inter-world transportation would be easier the more I did it. But it seemed like I was still paying for the near-instant travel with my short-term sense of equilibrium and well-being.

I stumbled over to my couch. Carefully, I set two bags and a tiny wooden box on the side table. Then I flopped onto the cushions for a minute to let my head clear. It was already dark outside. The chirp of crickets percolated through the drawn curtains, and the dim glow of the streetlights winked on as I brushed a dark lock of hair from my face.

At least I hadn't been detained that long in returning. Andeluvia had a lot less paperwork to fill out than my adopted hometown, the City of Angels. When the two white-cloaked men who formed the 'mortuarium' arrived from the House of Hospitalliers, they didn't tape off the area like a crime scene. Nor did they ask a single question of me or my three friends. Instead, they silently bowed and then respectfully placed the poor dead captain onto a crude stretcher. From there, they brought him to a waiting cart for transportation to the House itself, leaving us to our business.

"Upon your next return, I shall have a freshly charged amulet for you," Galen assured me, just as I mentally prepared myself to wink out of his world.

"I'll hold you to that," I kidded him, and he smiled. It had taken a while for the Wizard to adapt to and understand my style of humor, but he pretty well kept up with me now.

My head finally stopped doing the samba after a few moments. And my stomach grumbled its displeasure with a vengeance. I kicked off my shoes, grabbed the trio of objects that I'd brought back from Andeluvia, and padded over to the kitchen. The same olive linoleum floor and faded earth-tone cabinets that only a designer from the

1970's would have loved greeted me.

I set the box and the two bags aside on the counter. The box contained the deadly pair of darts I'd pulled from Vazura's neck. One bag, which was made of cloth and tied up with string, held the handful or two of dust that Galen had retrieved from the courtyard. The other was a quart-sized polyvinyl bag that I'd originally used to bring a wedge of cheesecake back to Andeluvia for my friends to try. Now, it held hair, blood, and tissue samples from Vazura's body. A dim blue aura shimmered around the bag, and an electrical tingle ran up my arm if I held it with more than two fingers. Galen's hastily concocted preservation spell would keep everything inside in stasis until tomorrow morning, which I was very grateful for. No matter how used to gross things I got in my line of work, I hadn't been looking forward to storing this bag in my refrigerator, next to the open milk carton and six-pack of yogurt.

I whipped up an impromptu salad out of shredded romaine lettuce, cherry tomatoes, and a quarter-jar of artichoke hearts. The handful of garlic crouton cubes I added on a whim were hard enough to cut glass, so I softened them up by drowning them with olive oil and enough balsamic vinegar to make my toes curl.

A *bleep* came from where I'd left my cell phone rested in its charger. A quick check of the screen confirmed what I'd expected: it was a classically blunt text from Bob McClatchy about tomorrow morning.

Probation hearing scheduled for 9am. Second-floor mtg room.

My finger moved to type in a confirmation, but I hesitated. Instead, I put the phone back into its charger cradle. Heck with him. I'd be there, but I didn't want to talk to the man, even via a text message.

My tummy also wanted something more solid than vegetables. So I pulled out a pair of leftover microwave taquitos and nuked them until they were well and truly sterilized. As I sat at the dining room table and did my best impression of Peter the Rabbit, I considered what to do with the remainder of the evening. I toyed with the idea of going downtown after hours to run my samples. I could probably

sneak in the same way I'd done once with Galen in tow – through the medical waste dumpster area.

Reluctantly, I dismissed the idea.

Regardless of how the Lead Does felt about Sirrahon, he wasn't on their front doorstep just yet. Liam confirmed that he'd had his golden eagle flying a pretty good clip for several hours. That put our ancient stone dragon at least two hundred miles from the Fayleene Woods. And it didn't seem like this was the kind of creature that could move around without being detected by King Fitzwilliam's border patrols. So we were all betting that we had at least a couple of days to figure out something – anything – before Sirrahon hit us like a tsunami of scales and bad attitude.

Add to that the inconvenient fact that I was already on very thin ice with the M.E.'s office. If I got caught sneaking into the facility and using the lab equipment after hours, it would look very bad at the hearing. I'd probably be asked to turn in my badge then and there.

I finished my dinner, put my fork down, and made a very unladylike open-mouth yawn. Yes, my body and mind agreed that I needed some extra beauty sleep, heavy on the extra. It wasn't that late yet. But there were things to consider.

Since this morning, I'd frozen my butt off in a strange forest. Been transformed into a magical doe creature. Learned that Prince Liam was going to have to deal with an ancient stone dragon or be exiled. Confronted a king. Almost got flogged and-or thrown into a dungeon. And then I'd witnessed the murder of a man I'd sworn to protect.

All of which added up to one thing: I needed some sleep before I completely fell apart.

A quick stop at the bathroom. I tried to muster up the motivation to brush my teeth. My hands began to quiver as soon as I picked up the toothbrush. The shower called to me, to scrub away the awful feelings that were bubbling under my skin, but I turned away from it and lay on top of the covers on my bed.

I closed my eyes. Focused on my breathing, the way I'd learned in a long-ago yoga class. It had been a while since I felt the need to relax this way. A month ago, I'd been shot at with a rifle. I had a little more

control over my feelings this time. But just as before, my feelings of relief, of knowing that I had survived – it was mixed with the disturbing surety that just out of my sight, horrible things were moving around in the dark.

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't in Los Angeles anymore.

Warm mist billowed from between my lips as I stood in the middle of a snow-covered forest. Bright morning sunshine gleamed off the rime of ice that coated the tree trunks around me. Instantly, I knew where I was.

It was a frigid December in the woods of Pike County, Illinois.

I'd just turned seven.

This was 'The Dream'. The memory of when I'd discovered that my father had slaughtered the poor fayleene doe who'd been transported to our world. I'd suppressed the memory for so long that it had become a recurring vision that hovered between unsettling daydream and night terror.

I took a step, heard a crunch like someone biting into stale crusts of bread. When I looked down, I expected to see the little pink wigwam boots I'd worn back then. Instead, the tops of my boots were maroon. I lifted my foot, jiggled off the dusting of snow. These were the snow boots I'd bought when I'd been in college. My legs were the length that they were now, not all those years ago. That made my blood run cold, as cold as the biting wind.

I'd always been in this dream as a seven-year old girl. Never as an adult.

And for some strange reason, that scared me more than anything.

A blood trail stood out against the snow. Scarlet patches splattered in an uneven line like some piece of performance art gone dreadfully wrong. The line of droplets meandered drunkenly between the trees. I nodded to myself. Felt my mind retreat from the fear by diving into the analytical portion of things. The fayleene doe had lost a lot of blood by this point. She'd been swaying back and forth on her four spindly deer legs. The legs that I'd gotten to try out this past morning.

At one point, the droplets became a splatter. The doe must have fallen for a moment, probably onto her front knees. Terrified of the

figure in the orange hunting jacket that stalked her, she'd heaved herself up and continued on. I followed.

Off to the left was a bright gash against the papery-thin bark of a sugar maple tree. Reeling worse now, feeling the effects of extreme blood loss, the doe had trouble keeping her head upright. One antler tine had gashed the tree as she had staggered past.

Then the trail of blood drops changed direction. Now it headed towards my family's house. The snow grew more disturbed here, just as the red-green glow of the Christmas lights that rambled along our front porch shone through the tangle of branches and snow-choked undergrowth.

I stopped. Saw the snow for the first time with my adult eyes. Here was when the doe had finally come to rest and not gotten up. Not as much blood as I'd expected. Her body, though failing, was trying its best to seal the wound, to plug the horrible hole in her side. Next to the deepest imprint in the snow, the smears of weakly flailing legs, the scrape of the head as it hit the hard ground, were my father's footprints.

Right next to the deer, deeper prints where he'd knelt on one knee to look at her. Where she'd raised her head and asked: *Why? Why did you kill me?*

In shock, in wide-eyed disbelief and in certainty that he'd done something monstrous, my father had picked up the doe's body. Somehow, he'd carried her back to the garage freezer. Against my will, my feet carried me along the same path. Up the side of our driveway, past our beat-up station wagon and up to the garage's side door.

I reached out to grab the knob. Lime-green flecks of paint flaked off on my glove as I turned it. The smell of wood smoke from our old house fireplace filled my nose. Followed by the stink of paint thinner and gasoline and blood.

I pushed the door open.

The all-weather bulb inside the garage hung from the rafters by a single paint-spattered cord. Daddy's orange hunting vest was streaked with red. He knelt before the white, coffin-shaped chamber, sobbing

as he gazed upon the bony nubs of antler that projected from within.

He turned to look at me. But his eyes were gone. Ragged holes like gunshot wounds gazed back at me. His voice rose to a thunderous shout.

"Look at what you've done, Dayna! See how the fayleene die!"

My insides turned to water as the fayleene doe sat up in the freezer with a dull *thump*. Her hooves were claws, her teeth sharp, and her skull flattened into the reptilian shape of a dragon's head. She let out a shriek like a winter gale off the plains.

"*Your fault! YOUR FAULT! You're a worthless little pipsqueak of a girl!*"

That was enough for my steadiest nerves to roll up shop and bar the doors. I turned and ran, whimpering like the seven-year old that I was inside. An awful, slow run, like jogging in quicksand. Darkness fell with the suddenness of a thrown blanket, smothering light. My breaths came in hot little pants, ears splitting with the screams and shrieks of the things behind me.

Around me, too. Black shapes with glowing eyes coiled around to my front even as the noises behind faded away. The sound of hoof beats. I staggered to a stop, chest pounding, eyes full of tears as I realized that I was surrounded. The largest of the monstrous shapes coalesced in front of me. I threw my arms up in front of me, let out a final scream as it opened its cavernous mouth, fangs bared…

"We need your help, Dayna Chrissie," it said.

Well, I wasn't expecting *that*.

"Uh…" I gulped, "who…I mean, what do you want?"

"I am Reveé, the Dream Speaker," the shape continued, in a reasonable, vaguely female voice. There was an accent there too, but I couldn't quite place it. "We have been summoned to assist you in your investigation. Our price is that you help us in turn. One of our number cannot do that for which he was born. No magic has been able to find out what is wrong with him. Maybe, we feel, a person of science is what is needed. So. Will you give your word that you will meet our price?"

I hesitated. Keep in mind, I was still scared out of my wits. Not

exactly the best position to be negotiating, or even blindly agreeing to anything.

"This is just a dream," I murmured to myself, "I don't know if any of this is real."

The female voice raised itself back into a banshee wail.

"*WILL YOU MEET OUR PRICE?*"

"Yes!" I cried out, as I shook like a leaf. "Yes, yes! Please, just leave me alone!"

"Then the bargain, she is struck!"

Oh, God! I thought miserably. *Please, don't hold me to any more promises, I can't do this anymore…*

A crash of thunder. Lightning lashed the night like bright golden whips, making me cringe. The voice came from the darkness once more.

"If you fail in your task, we shall have no choice but to unmake him. To return him to the ether from whence he came. And your failure will not be forgotten by us, *we who bring the terrors of the night!*"

I came awake in a gasp. Sweat ran down my forehead like I had a fever. I rubbed it away clumsily with the back of my hand. I'd fallen asleep. I'd had the worst nightmare I'd had in years. I opened my eyes a crack. Saw the gray glimmer of dawn peeking through the slats on my bedroom window. The room was still plunged in shadows, though. I sat up, swung my feet over and put them on the cool hardwood floor. I groped for the lamp switch on my nightstand and flicked it on.

A huge black horse with blank yellow eyes stood in front of me.

I let out a cry that even my seven-year-old self would have thought girly and dove back onto the bed. I buried my face in my hands, felt the sting of sweat mixed with tears.

"This can't be happening, this can't be happening," I sobbed.

A deep, horsey snort echoed in my room. Inside my head, I heard a voice. A voice like Reveé's, only male. That voice laughed gently in my ear, and then spoke in an accent that sounded *French*, of all things.

"Looks like you have a bad case of the frights, *ma chére*."

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Chapter Fourteen

During my sophomore year in college, my roommate thought it would be funny to spike my morning coffee with six full shots of espresso. Aside from the hyperventilating and heart palpitations, I had to admit it was a most effective way to wake up.

Having a big black horse show up out of your latest nightmare trumped that. By a long shot.

"This is all a dream," I murmured into my pillow. "I've got to wake up."

The same masculine voice echoed in my head again. "Have no more fear, for you are awake. *Croyez-moi,* I should be knowing this, for I am Destarius de Revasser, of the *pouquelaye*."

I turned my head and cautiously opened my eyes. Yup, the big scary-looking horse was still standing there next to my bed. His withers were a bit shorter than the equine part of Galen's body, and overall this creature was of a much lighter build. Where the Wizard had the stocky features of a draft horse, 'Destarius' looked a little more like a Thoroughbred.

His body was coal-dust black and sleekly muscled, as if he were carved out of obsidian. But his eyes and mane were what kicked his look out of the 'horse' category and into left field. His dark mane stood up in a bristly wave, and his bright yellow eyes, devoid of anything like a pupil, glimmered like citrine sapphires.

I sat up again. To triple-check that I wasn't dreaming, I pinched myself on my arm. Hard. Yeah, it hurt. The horse-creature watched me perform the test, and while I didn't see his mouth move, I heard the ghost of a chuckle in my ear when I was done.

"Satisfied, *chére?*"

"I'm going to have to be," I said cautiously. "I've really got no choice but to accept what I'm seeing. So…what exactly are you? And how are you doing this ventriloquism thing? I mean, it's spooky that your lips don't move when you're talking with me."

Another lightly-accented chuckle. “Those of us you call ‘non-corporeal’ are outside many people’s experience. Reach your hand out, just so, and touch me.”

The fear I’d been feeling had rapidly shrunk to a manageable thing once my curiosity got engaged. I stood and gingerly ran a hand alongside his muzzle. It felt warm. Solid. And completely horse-like, excepting that there was no equine scent of skin, hair, or stable.

“Now, try and touch again,” he instructed me. A barely-there swish of wind, and his form shimmered into a dim outline of his former self.

I moved my hand and let out a gasp as my fingers slid through the formerly solid planes of the creature’s face. It felt like I’d passed my hand through a puff of smoke.

“I think I understand,” I said. “You communicate telepathically because you’d have problems speaking when you ‘fade out’. No voice box, no vocal cords to vibrate against the air.”

“You have it in one. Now, as to what I am? I admit, I am hurt to the quick that you have not heard of my noble people, the *pouquelaye.* Perhaps, I think, you know us under another name in *anglais*: the ‘pooka’.”

“That sort of rings a bell,” I said hesitantly, not wanting to offend. “I’m really sorry that I don’t know more about your people, Dess… Desorry...”

“Destarius de Revasser,” he repeated, with a flourish. “I know, it is much the mouthful for some.”

I rubbed my eyes and flicked away a grain of sleep sand as I replied. “Honestly, I’m terrible at names in general. Would it be…I don’t know, would you be insulted if I just called you ‘Destry’? At least I could remember that. You can just call me ‘Dayna’, I don’t stand on formality all that much.”

Destry nickered his amusement. “*Très bon!* So it shall be, Dayna.”

“So it shall.” I gave Destry a look. “What is it with your people’s accent? It sounds…well, sort of European. Continental. But I just don’t see how you come by it, if you’re not from this world.”

“Ah, but your ear is talented. The line of my dam, she is from

Bretagne. We grow up speaking *Guernésiais*, what others call 'Norman' French. But we travel much. For the *pouquelaye* have long crossed between worlds, ever since there were creatures who could dream. That is what we do, of course: deliver bad dreams."

"Yeah," I declared crossly. "Your leader, Reveé? She's particularly good at it."

Somehow, Destry was able to slip a Gallic shrug into the voice in my head. "The Dream Speaker can be, I could say…a bit direct. Your vision, the one with your father and the forest in winter – it is a vivid one. It gave her the most direct access into your mind, so that she could strike the deal for me with you."

I considered that for a moment. "It's vivid enough, all right. I just can't figure out why I had that same dream again. I mean, I solved the mystery behind it. It's a memory, something that really happened."

"Solving is not the same as understanding, *n'est pas?* This dream, you carry her guilt with you. From the death of the fayleene doe. It is why you keep dreaming about it, why it keeps you from the soundest of sleeps."

"I don't know about that. I feel pretty rested, actually."

That's when my gaze fell upon the clock on my nightstand. It was fifteen effing minutes past effing *eight* in the morning. The damned curtains and blinds I had closed over the bedroom windows made it a lot darker than I'd thought.

"Dammit!" I cursed, and I ran over to my clothes closet. "Look, Destry, I hate to be a poor host, but I need to get somewhere important in the next forty-five minutes, and Los Angeles isn't known for easy traffic."

"But of course, I understand."

I threw pieces of another business attire getup onto the bed. I'd feel more than a little gross not showering, but I was really running late. All I had time for was what one of my ex-boyfriends called 'a cowboy shower', which meant a switch of undergarments, a splash of mouthwash, and a liberal application of deodorant or perfume. I shed my outer clothes in record time, jammed my thumbs into the elastic band of my panties, and then stopped.

A quick glance over my shoulder. Destry stood right where I'd left him, politely watching me. Again, my skin threatened to break out into a blush.

"Ah…Destry?"

"Eh?"

"Can you please…turn around? Or go visit the living room? I'm about to get naked."

"Dayna," he said, with a verbal roll of his eyes, "While you are *belle jolie*, I have the masculine appreciation for equine beauty alone, and only when it is properly in heat. Besides, I am already 'naked', does that bother you?"

What is it with these male creatures? I thought, as my impatience got the better of me.

"All right, that's enough!" I snapped. "*About face!*"

On cue, the pooka swung around to look in the opposite direction.

Destry cleared his throat. "You have quite the firm hand with your friends, *chére*," he complained. "When you find the time, perhaps you will speak to me of which problem you wish my help with. There is the death of the cavalry captain. Or, there is the fayleene prince. The one who must murder a dragon to assume power. The need for a new ruler to prove himself, it is a story told again and again through time."

"It may be both," I replied with a grunt, as I squeezed into new undergarments.

I smeared a wet roller-ball of antiperspirant under my arms, and then shrugged into the new clothes. I didn't have time to iron anything, but the clothes had been hung properly in the closet so they weren't badly wrinkled. Finally, I dove for the bathroom sink. I dabbed on some quick makeup, swished a shot glass worth of mouthwash, and then doused myself with enough perfume to leave a dense pink cloud in my wake.

Destry walked at my side as I grabbed my car keys and headed to the kitchen. I picked up the bags and box, stuck them into one of my larger purses, and made a dash for the garage. I spared him another glance as I threw open the driver's side door.

"Look, I apologize for leaving you like this. But I may very well

get roasted on a spit by this Deputy Chief at my probation hearing. If I lose my job, then I've got no way to access the machines I need to crack either problem. Or help you with your own problem, whatever that is."

"This sounds quite the important meeting," Destry mused, as I got in, slammed the car door, and put the key in the ignition. "Do you mind if I come with you? Perhaps I can give you a *petite avantage*, no?"

"Sure, sure," I said offhandedly, as the engine came to life with a roar. I hit the garage door button. Overhead, the motor to open the door muttered and squeaked like a disgruntled squirrel. "I don't think you can fit in my car, though. So I'll talk to you later, okay?"

I backed out into street. Felt the warm Southern California sunshine warm my hands, my face. Destry stood quietly in the garage as the door rolled back down, and I gunned the motor to merge with the traffic on the fast-flowing boulevard ahead.

Of course, the one time that I needed to get anywhere on time, that boulevard was the only fast-flowing street I found that day. The freeway was stop-and-go, with a lot more of the former than the latter. Less than five minutes remained before nine as I pulled into one of the few remaining parking spots at the far end of M.E. building's lot.

I threw open the door, grabbed my handbag, and got out.

"Hello," Destry said, as I stood up.

I jumped and let out a little squeak of surprise. The big black horse stood in the empty parking spot next to me, looking completely at ease. I closed the door by bumping it with my hip and gave him a stern look.

"You are definitely going to take some getting used to," I admitted, as I got my heart rate back under control. "How am I supposed to get you into the building?"

"Walls, they pose little problem for me. Go ahead, I shall follow you."

I nodded, slung the purse over my shoulder, and set off for the entry doors at the fastest walk I could manage in my low heels. True

to his word, Destry simply faded through the glass entry doors, a retaining wall, and even the metal detector. His hooves *clip-clopped* on the hard marble floors, but apparently I was the only person who heard anything. Only once, when we were crossing the wide-open entryway past the security checkpoint, did anything faze me.

A little boy, no more than six or seven, bobbed along behind his mother in his Sunday school best. He stopped and gaped at me and Destry.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "What a cool horse! Is it yours?"

"Thanks," I replied. "He's not mine, I just can't get him to stop following me."

The boy's mother gave me an odd look. She squinted in my direction, obviously not seeing the big black equine at my side. Then they were lost in the crowd of people heading to the elevators. I avoided the crush of bodies and took the stairs.

"How did that kid see you?" I asked, as Destry made his way up in my wake.

Another verbal shrug. "Though we can phase through walls, pooka are not ghosts. It is more that we have gotten very good at not being noticed. Since your people started putting screens on your phones, it has gotten so easy that it is no longer much of a challenge."

I pushed through the entry doors on the second floor. Then I turned to look at my pooka companion, a new respect dawning in my eyes.

"All right. I am impressed. What else can you do, Destry? I mean, you can see into my mind, at least some. What about other people, can you read them as well?"

"I have some little power there," he replied. "With most humans from this world, I can read thoughts on the surface. Strong emotions when they are not in slumber."

"Can you change someone's mind? Influence them to do something?"

"Ah, the pooka do not have that power," he demurred. "Dreams and nightmares, for example, are still conjured by one's own fears, one's personal *démons*."

The way that Destry phrased his answer to that sounded odd to me. But I put that aside from a moment as I spotted the door to the meeting room ahead. I took a deep breath. Steadied, calmed myself. Wouldn't help me much if I barged on in, no matter how late I was. I was calm, cool, and I had everything under control.

"Okay, Destry. I've got to put this chat with you on ice, or they'll send me off to have my head shrunk."

"But of course," the pooka agreed, and I heard the smile in his voice.

I pushed through the doors and into the room. Deputy Chief McClatchy looked up from where he had been in intense conversation with a trio of people. The trio sat behind one long table set catty-corner to the room, while McClatchy, a barrel-chested, red-faced man wearing his trademark one-size-too-small pinstripes, sat at another.

The three probation officers gave me a frosty look. They all wore no-nonsense clothes in near-identical shades of beige. One was a sallow-faced man, while the two others were women with the sour expressions of nuns forced to attend a death metal concert.

"Good morning," I greeted them, with the sincerest smile I could muster. "I'm Dayna Chrissie, and I–"

One of the beige-clad women cut me off as she intoned, "Let the record show that Ms. Dayna Chrissie was late to this hearing."

My new-found confidence took that verbal torpedo and promptly sank without a trace.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Fifteen

"Please take a seat."

The sallow-faced man indicated an empty chair with a jab of his red ballpoint pen. He paused to take a long sip of his coffee as I followed his order.

Like a pair of drinking bird toys, the women next to him followed suit with twin *slurps*.

The chair was one of those hard plastic ones that could make your butt fall asleep. Worse, someone had positioned it smack in between the two tables. So not only did you feel as if you were on trial in front of the probation board, but Bob McClatchy as well. Depending on who was talking, I would have to swivel my head if I wanted to look at them head-on.

The muffled *clop-clop* of hooves on carpet echoed in my ear, and I had to remind myself not to turn and look. From the corner of my eye, I saw Destry approach and stand off to my left like a big block of ebony granite.

Sallow-face swallowed his coffee and went on. "Ms. Chrissie, your absence has, as my colleague points out, been duly noted. Deputy Chief McClatchy was of the opinion that you might not show up at all."

That made me grit my teeth. My confidence stopped its free-fall and was replaced by a spark of irritation.

"I don't see why he would feel that way," I replied. "Because I do show up when I'm asked, to the best of my ability. If you will review my employment history, you should see no record of unexplained sick time or vacations–"

"That's nice," he cut in, "but I'm not clear on how that relates to McClatchy's complaint against you." The woman sitting next to the beige-suited man raised an eyebrow at that, but remained silent.

Suddenly, the pooka's voice whispered urgently in my ear. "That woman, she has an image in her mind. A piece of paper that says 'Off-

Shift Time Sheets'."

I cleared my throat and decided to go with Destry's hint. "I believe it does relate, in that it shows I don't have a history of leaving the job without notice. In fact, I've spent great deal of time responding to LAPD requests to visit crime scenes outside of my normal work hours. Since I'm an independent contractor, this costs the City of Los Angeles extra. So I've had to record each instance on my time sheets."

"I agree," said the beige-accented woman in the middle. "We have accounted for this in our review. Indeed, Ms. Chrissie, your paperwork is impeccable when it comes to off-hours tabulation."

McClatchy let out a snort that put any of Destry's to shame. "As far as I'm concerned, her past performance does not excuse the incident in question. What about the overtime billed to my office? What about the time spent by my officers to locate little Miss Chrissie when she was placed under police protection?"

Destry *tsked*. "This chieftain of yours? He is quite cross, and only just able to control himself. And see the woman on the end there? She is *pas content* over that last comment."

Indeed, the second woman, the one with a bouffant hairdo at least thirty years out of style, narrowed her eyes as she looked across the room at McClatchy. It was only a quick flash before she hid her expression, but Destry had called it. Maybe I could play that angle up, get Bob to make a few more errors.

"I sincerely appreciated the protection," I pointed out, "but I think this was a simple miscommunication; no one had told me how long I was supposed to have an escort. I left the M.E.'s office without anyone telling me I was supposed to check in with your men. You may not be aware of this, but even though I'm a woman, I do know how to take care of myself."

"You only think you do!" Bob shot back. "Like most women, you have no idea how to take care of yourself!"

"Oh, my," Destry chuckled, as the woman with the bouffant shot daggers at McClatchy with her eyes. "Now she is quite angry with your friend, quite angry indeed."

I shook my head. "You and I will have to disagree on that point.

Like I said, I didn't know when and how to interact with your patrolmen. How can you hold me accountable for that? If this was so important, why was I not given explicit guidelines?"

"If it was so important?" McClatchy growled. "How would you know what 'important' means? This probation meeting was certainly important. And you showed up late."

"The man on the panel," Destry put in, "he is thinking about the crashed cars he spied upon the road this morning. The sign by the road, it showed a number '10'."

"That wasn't my fault," I said dismissively. "There was a pileup on the Pomona freeway. I got stuck in the traffic jam just like everyone else."

"Not your fault?" McClatchy's voice went up a notch. "That's ridiculous! You don't use the Pomona freeway to get here from your house!"

"You are making him boil," Destry said. "I would push him on this."

I cocked my head at McClatchy. "Who said I was coming from my house?"

"Then where the hell were you?" McClatchy demanded.

"I do have a social life, you know. I had a date that turned into something more suited for private conversation. Or did you want me to recite the play-by-play?"

"Don't be insolent! If I want the play-by-play from you, then you'd damn well tell me every last detail of your pillow talk!"

A *bang* as the bouffant-haired woman slammed her notebook shut. She stood, red-faced, and leaned forward on the table.

"That is quite enough, Deputy Chief McClatchy!" she stated firmly. "You are asking questions that could fall afoul of our policies on sexual harassment!"

"I concur," the other woman chimed in. "And the rest of this hearing has been a waste of time. All of the accusations I've heard today fall under the category of 'personal squabbles'. They're certainly not about violating the LAPD's professional standards."

The sallow-faced man let out a gasp of protest. "But…there is still

the issue of unresolved overtime incurred by two of McClatchy's officers."

"Even so, it does appear to have been caused by a simple case of miscommunication. Three weeks of probation and a note on the contractor's employment record seems appropriate punishment to me. And since Ms. Chrissie has spent three weeks on probation already, I believe she's 'served her time'. Given our chronic shortage of personnel in the forensics department, I recommend that she be reinstated to full privileges in the M.E.'s office immediately."

After a moment, the man said, "I guess I'll second that."

"Furthermore, I recommend that Deputy Chief McClatchy re-take our department's training program on Sexual Harassment Prevention."

"I will certainly second *that*," the bouffant-haired woman huffed, and the man echoed his agreement.

Having made their pronouncement, the three beige-clothed panelists frostily thanked both me and McClatchy for attending. A not-so-subtle way of dismissing us as they wrote up their final report, but all I wanted was to get out of that meeting room before anything else happened.

McClatchy paused when we'd shut the door to the meeting room. "I don't know what just happened in there," he said sulkily, "but I'll be watching you like a hawk from now on."

"You're all sunshine, Bob," I replied.

"Again with being a smart-ass. Do you know any other tricks?"

"It's not my fault that you give me so much material to work with."

He gave me a venomous look. "Just remember, Chrissie: Any screw-up, and I'll be on you like fleas on a dog."

He grunted and stormed off.

Normally, I felt darned good about beating McClatchy at his game. But this time, I got a bad feeling. And it didn't go away when Destry appeared by my side.

"There is something *très mauvais* with that man," he remarked. "He truly believes that the world is out to get him. To hold him back from whatever he believes he is destined for."

I shuddered a little at that, but there was nothing I could do to remedy the situation.

"Come on," I said, "I've got work to do, and I can't think of a better time than now to do it."

Destry followed along in my wake down a series of slate-gray corridors until I got to the Chem Lab. While the facility's older Ballistics Lab reminded me of a cross between a badly run machine shop and a sleazy cafeteria, this room at least was a tiny step up. Aqua blue tiles and bright orange plastic chairs gave this lab the cheesy, halfway cheery look of a down-at-the-heels fast food restaurant.

I greeted a couple of the technicians I sort of knew in passing, as I worked my way over to the far corner of the room. A bank of examination equipment and a length of counter space lay open for the taking, and I immediately put it to use. Destry watched, fascinated, as I put on a set of pale green gloves, face mask, and scrubs. I slid a protective visor over my eyes and then pulled out the cloth bag. I poured out a sample of the dust Galen had collected into a clear Lucite sample tray, and slipped it into the correct machine. Next, I followed the same procedures with the hair, tissue, and blood sample I'd stored in the plastic bag.

"*Intéressant*," Destry remarked. "The dust, she has a certain…scent to it. Magic has been done on it, no doubt. But the rest of what you are doing, I simply do not comprehend."

"The machines of my world can't detect magic," I explained. "But they might be able to tell me other things. For example, I placed the dust inside a mass spectrometer. It should tell me what that dust is made of, whether there is any organic matter inside. The blood, hair, and tissue went into various kinds of gas analyzers, to determine which poison tipped the darts that killed Vazura."

"Poison? Are you sure? That is a vile way to kill someone."

"I'm ninety-nine percent sure. Whatever killed Vazura, it did so almost instantly. The darts aren't anywhere nearly long enough to have ended his life any other way." I looked over to where the equipment hummed along, and then made sure that no one else on the other side of the room was watching my conversation with my pooka

companion. “This shouldn’t take too much longer. In the meantime, I want to look at our murder weapons.”

I pulled out the wooden box and used a pair of forceps to place each dart into its own Lucite tray. Destry moved closer to the table, his muzzle almost touching one of the little missiles. He sniffed at one dart, then the other.

I took the trays from him and began to go over each dart with the microscope at low power. Vazura’s blood hung in a bruise-colored dab at the end of a hellishly sharp point. I moved the scope’s viewer along the weapon’s shaft, confirming that it had been made by a set of five individual pine needles, wrapped and braided around each other to form a strong, pliable surface.

“Anything, Dayna?” Destry asked, as I leaned back from the scope.

“Nothing we don’t already know,” I grumbled. “We’re going to have to wait to see what the other machines tell us.”

“It is truly amazing, what you can do here. Even though I am of this world, I know nothing of these things except from what I have seen in dreams.”

“Really? What kind of dreams?”

“I have seen bad dreams about waking up on a coroner’s table, as you might guess. Rather, I mean that Reveé has shown them to me. I could not view these things on my own.”

That got my attention. I gave Destry a look.

“You couldn’t see these things…of course, this must relate to the problem I’m supposed to solve for you.” I sighed. “I’m sorry I haven’t tried to help you yet, there’s a lot on my mind right now. Reveé said that you couldn’t perform your function. Which I assume has to do with delivering bad dreams.”

A nicker. “That is a fine assumption, *chérie*. It is a defining characteristic of the *pouquelaye.*”

“Complete inability to deliver nightmares…it must really bother Reveé, if she’s brought you to me.”

“I *can* deliver the terrors of the night,” Destry added. “But not *at* night, which is really when they should take place, yes?”

“So you can do…daymares?”

“Unpleasant daydreams, really. But most daydreams are cute, or hopeful. At most, they are filled with vague unease. This makes my sire and dam *furieux*, as you might guess.”

“Okay, then,” I said, looking at him straight on, “why can’t you deliver dreams at night?”

Destry shied a bit. When he spoke, his voice was soft, embarrassed.

“The truth, Dayna…is that…*I am afraid of the dark*.”

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Chapter Sixteen

Until that moment, I never thought that a big, scary-looking equine could look ashamed. Especially one from a breed that had 'delivering bad dreams' as their *raison d'être*. But the way Destry hung his head and lightly stamped his feet made it clear that he wasn't happy at all with the way things had turned out for him.

And the irony of his problem wasn't lost on either of us.

"It crosses my mind much," Destry stated. "What use am I, when the very core of my self turns to jelly and quakes at the thought of moving but a single step in the dark?"

I took a seat. The lab equipment hummed away, heating the test sample and sniffing it for chemical traces. The smell of warmed-up plastic curled up my nose, and I breathed it out before it made me sneeze.

"What about when you appeared in my room?" I asked. "It was pretty dim in there, and yet I didn't seem to bother you."

"It did, but not enough to truly unnerve me. Only in the complete and true darkness of the night does it reduce my stallionhood to trembling fear."

I gave some thought to the experiences of my friends. Considered how there might be a hint of how to deal with this. Shaw's issue had revolved around age; Destry was fairly young, so it didn't sound like there would be a parallel. Like the pooka, Liam had also lacked a critical magical component of his species, but he'd been driven into exile. Destry's people were still trying to help him, so that was out. And then there was Galen. The centaur's issues involved bad experiences with his Dad about his chosen discipline. It still wasn't much of a match, but I tried to follow up along the same lines.

"Destry, did you ever have a bad experience involving the darkness?"

"Ah, yes. Every single time, there was a bad experience."

"Actually, I meant: when did you become afraid of the dark?"

He cocked his head to look at me. “I do not understand. The darkness is as always, no?”

“No. I mean, yes,” I said, trying to keep up with the pooka’s distinctive speech patterns. “Yes, the darkness is always…well, dark. But you couldn’t always have been afraid of it.”

“*Pourquoi pas?*”

He had me there. *Why not,* indeed. “Maybe I’m looking at this from the wrong angle.”

“Perhaps. I hope you do find this right ‘angle’. Otherwise…it seems that my sire and my dam will have no choice but to unmake me. It seems sad to me, when there is so much I feel that I have not partaken of in life.”

Destry pawed at the floor again. I felt for him; I had no idea what ‘death’ would be like for a creature like a pooka. But while Galen’s father had disowned him, there had been no talk of ‘unmaking’. And that stuck in my craw something fierce.

“Have faith,” I said firmly. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

“One hopes not.” I could have been imagining it, but Destry looked halfway hopeful. “Dayna, I am curious as well: why do my elders think you can help me?”

“Well, they said I was a woman of science…but I don’t think that’s really it.”

“No?”

This time I shook my head. “It’s because the story’s gotten around that I helped a centaur, a griffin, and a fayleene overcome similar obstacles. They’re good friends of mine now, and they’re a crack team I can call upon when I need them.”

“Then I am reassured. Maybe the elders made a good choice putting me in your hands,” Destry said, with a bow and a nicker. He raised his head and added, “Someone approaches who knows you. I see your image in her mind.”

I glanced to one side and saw Shelly enter the Chem Lab. She spotted me and made her way over quickly, a wicked smirk on her face. She leaned an elbow on my section of counter space as she spoke in a conspiratorial tone.

“Word’s going ’round the department like fire in dry grass! I’m hearing that Bob McClatchy came on to you, or at least said something nasty. They say that he’s got to sit in on sensitivity training again or he’s out of the running for Chief of Police!”

“Ah, the infamous ‘they’, again.” I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t all that everyone’s making it out to be.”

“That may be.” Shelly’s face got serious. A quick glance confirmed that the lab had gone empty for a little bit. “But make no mistake, you just made yourself a grade-A enemy, Dayna. Watch your back, is all I got to say.”

I nodded. “That’s becoming my personal motto as of late.”

One of the gas analysis machines chose that moment to go *ping* as it finished its task.

Shelly looked at the machine, and then back to me. A frown creased her face.

“You’ve been reinstated what, half an hour ago? How is it that you’ve already got a case to work on?”

“It’s complicated,” I hedged. “Sort of a private matter.”

“That was a bad answer,” Destry reproached me. “Your friend, she knows you are lying, but she does not wish to report you out on this.”

“It’s okay,” Shelly said. She straightened up, tugged off her pince-nez glasses and let them hang by the chain about her neck. “You don’t have to tell me anything. But just remember: I didn’t go to school on the short bus, and I ain’t blind, neither.”

I stood too. Reached my hand out to touch her arm. “Shelly, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“No one ever ‘means to’, Dayna.”

“Look, I appreciate everything you’ve ever done for me,” I said sincerely. “This just isn’t the right time for me to lay all of my cards out. When it is, I promise you’ll be surprised.”

“Well…” now it was Shelly’s turn to look halfway hopeful. “Does it involve that hunky friend of yours showing up again?”

“As a matter of fact, it does.”

“Then I can wait for that blessed day.” Shelly gave my hand a friendly squeeze before she walked off, heels clicking loudly in the

sudden silence of the room.

"That one, Shelly," Destry said, "she cares for you like *a petite fille* – how you would say, a 'little daughter'?"

"If so, then I've been a pretty poor one," I sighed. I hit the 'print' button on one machine, and then the others as they began to spit their results out in long spreadsheets of chemical signatures and equations. Destry craned his long neck over my shoulder to see some of the diagrams.

"I wish I knew what these symbols meant," he complained. "But do you have what you were looking for?"

"Yes," I confirmed, as I picked up the small bunches of paper. The sheets felt warm in my hands, still a touch moist from the printer. I grabbed a nearby paper-clip holder and shook out a couple of the larger clips. "Destry, I take it that you can follow me on your own if I return to Andeluvia?"

"*Mais bien sûr*, it is what my kind do. Shall we leave this instant?"

I frowned as I read the readouts on the top sheet. "No. I need to go home one more time."

"Ah. Another change of clothes, perhaps? This time, I shall face away, resolutely."

"Yeah, another change," I said, as I got up. "And to get my shoulder holster."

"You expect some serious problems?"

"Maybe." I ruffled the papers in my hand. "Like my friend Shelly said, I had better start watching my back."

* * *

I arrived in the tower room of Fitzwilliam's palace with a flash-bang of light and a heave of my stomach. Before I even had time to stumble, I felt a strong, warm wall of hair press up against my side to steady me. I clutched at it as I blinked, and then straightened up.

"Don't worry, I have you," Liam's voice said. Once he was sure that I would remain upright, he took a step back. He glanced at my attire of slacks, no-nonsense blue work shirt, and a dark brown leather jacket. "I like your latest outfit. It reminds me of the one you wore when we took down Magnus."

“Thanks,” I said, though I’d chosen the attire to handle the Andeluvian weather, as well as to help hide the shoulder holster. I broke out in a smile as I gave him a closer look. “You’ve grown some more!”

“Indeed,” he said, somewhat abashedly. He pawed the stone floor in front of the darkened hearth, where the fire had been put out. “I only hope that I *stop* growing before I get beyond my prime.”

“I somehow doubt that. This magic seems to know what it’s doing.” Liam’s legs had lengthened, boosting his height another couple of inches, and his torso had continued to fill out. The fourth tine on his right antler had completely grown in, and the ‘buds’ on his left had begun to reach out, like stems on a plant.

“Were you able to make any headway on our problems?” he asked.

“I think so. And thanks to Galen’s summoning, we’ve got someone new to work with: one of the *pouquelaye*. I think this world calls them ‘pookas’.”

“One of the ghost horses?” Liam’s ears perked up in that damnably cute way of his, showing his interest. “How marvelous! They are fabled, mystical creatures!”

He paused as the air rippled with a faint *whoosh*. Suddenly, Destry shimmered into existence at my side, black and huge and silent. Liam gaped at the creature’s flaring mane and fierce, blank yellow eyes.

“That is quite the *hommage*, Heir to the Protector,” Destry intoned. “Yet I cannot help but feel amused. To many others of your world, it is the *fayleene* who are the fabled, mystical creatures.”

“And for pretty much everyone in my world,” I added, “you are *both* fabled creatures. As are our centaur and griffin friends.”

“You’ll like them,” Liam put in. “Our centaur is an Archmage-class Wizard. The griffin’s more of a typical specimen for his kind. Very friendly. ‘Hello, nice to meet you, you certainly look delicious this morning. I wonder if you are chewy or crunchy’.”

“Methinks I am being profaned!” Shaw’s voice boomed in from out in the hall. With a clatter of talon and hoof on stone, the griffin entered the room, followed on his heels by the centaur. They both

halted to take in the sight of our newest arrival.

"Magnificent!" Galen said, and he gave a sweeping bow. "I was not at all sure that my efforts to summon assistance would be answered. I underestimated the generosity of your elders, kind pooka."

The pooka and I traded a glance at that, but I decided to push on. I began with introducing everyone to Destry, and then turned the introduction back onto our new equine member. "This is Destry, of the *pouquelaye*. His involvement with us is part of a deal brokered with his people. In exchange for his help, I in turn will be looking into some...well, some ongoing difficulties he has with his job."

"Thou hast come to the right place," Shaw said encouragingly. "One only wishes for better timing. A murder most foul has come on the heels of a dragon problem involving yon fair stag here."

There came a knock at the tower room's open door. A human servant decked out in a red and black doublet peeked fearfully into the room. I suppose it was understandable. Truth be told, at least three members of our group did look more than a little imposing.

"Sirs?" he inquired, "We, ah, were summoned by the Court Wizard to bring food up to the tower room."

"I took the liberty of requesting a noontime repast to be brought here," Galen explained. "At least three of our members have traveled a great distance to be here, and I haven't broken fast since the fall of yesterday evening."

A trio of servants hurriedly brought in their wares. A large silver platter heaped high with what looked like green and purple lawn clippings was placed in front of Liam, who began to dig in without hesitation. An entire side of beef, flame-singed around the edges but dripping blood, was brought in on a long pole and shunted onto an even larger platter for Shaw. The griffin pounced on the meat and began tearing strips of it away with his stout beak. Finally, a set of smaller trays was placed out on the table for Galen and me. A set of freshly roasted skewers featuring slightly more cooked chunks of beef, mushrooms, and onions sat on one; small rounds of soft cheese and sliced bread were piled in a decorative pyramid on the other.

Two open tubs of sparkling fresh water with lumps of ice in them were placed next to the fayleene and the griffin. Pitchers of cool, unsweetened tea and startlingly sweet wine – which Galen called 'summer table crush' were set on the table along with a set of metal utensils and cups. I poured myself some tea and stabbed a chunk of roasted onion to munch on, using one of the two-tined forks the Andeluvian court apparently favored.

Galen cleared his throat as he directed a polite question at the pooka. "Destry, before the servants retire for the day, perhaps you could tell them what you would like for your repast?"

"Much thanks, kind Wizard," came the reply. "There is nothing they need bring for me."

The centaur nodded at the three servers and they disappeared post-haste.

"Out of curiosity," the centaur asked, "what do non-corporeal beings eat?"

"In truth, we much prefer the term *ethereals*," Destry replied. "As to what sustains our kind, it is always the same…*l'énergie de la pensée*. That energy which comes from thoughts, intense emotions or passions."

"That sounds a little disturbing," I mused, after I crunched through my onion and washed it down with a couple sips of tea. "If you are actually 'consuming' what we are thinking, are we losing our minds in some subtle way?"

"Absolutely not!" Destry snorted. "We do not 'consume' thoughts, any more than plants 'eat' sunshine. It is the same process by which a pooka knows a little about what a being is thinking or feeling at any given time they are awake."

"That's good to know," Liam admitted.

"For example, right now I am getting sustenance off the Wizard's curiosity about my kind, his thirst for knowledge," Destry explained. "I sense Liam's concerns for the future. Dayna's studied, analytical thinking. As for Shaw, his most intense passion right now is seeing how much raw meat he can consume in the next few minutes."

"Amazing!" Shaw exclaimed, as he lifted his beak from where he'd

been snapping and chomping his way through a set of rib bones. “Thou canst read my mind perfectly!”

With Destry’s power established, the griffin went back to chomping into his beef. We all focused a couple of minutes on replenishing ourselves while the pooka silently absorbed our thoughts. Myself, I did my best to limit myself to a single skewer of meat and vegetables, a small cube of cheese, and a lone cup of tea. The last thing I wanted right now was to slip into a calorie coma. When everyone had gotten down to the final nibbles and sips, I brought out a neatly folded bunch of papers from a jacket pocket to share my results.

“At least now I can confirm what killed Captain Vazura,” I began, and I instantly had everyone’s rapt attention. “Each dart tip was laced with one of the most potent poisons known: sodium cyanide. Injected directly into a major artery, it leads to death within three heartbeats.”

“Wizard,” Shaw asked, “art thou familiar with this substance?”

The centaur shook his head. “Perhaps this is a substance found only in Dayna’s world. Certainly, it has to be made by someone. I have never heard of any poison so lethal in nature, not even the deadliest of the envenomed serpents.”

“This could be assembled in this world as easily as in my own,” I corrected him. “But it has to be concocted by someone who knows how to put it together. And there’s something even more puzzling about the poison’s contents: the analysis showed traces of a substance that shouldn’t be in a mixture of this poison at all.”

“What would that substance be?”

I gave Galen a look that conveyed my puzzlement.

“Gold.”

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Chapter Seventeen

"There's no reason for gold to be in the mix for that particular kind of poison," I stated firmly. Around me, my companions had set their lunch aside and given me their full attention. A cool breeze blew through the tower window, rustling the palace's heavy red drapes and smelling faintly of the approaching autumn. "Worse, that was the only finding of note. Absolutely nothing unusual about the rock dust Galen collected, or the pine needles in the darts. The DNA trace I performed – that's a test to help the identify people by their genetic makeup – showed only two people's traces on those darts: mine, and Vazura's. So I don't have anything to indicate origin of the poison, or the poisoner."

Destry spoke up at that point. "Perhaps I can shine some more light into this darkness, no?"

I nodded and motioned to him to continue.

"There is a *suivre la trace* on those darts…how you say, a 'spoor' on them. Very light, very faint. An ethereal being handled those weapons. Made them too, maybe."

I frowned. "Why didn't you say something back at the Chem Lab?"

"I was unsure. Now I am here, I certainly am sure." Destry lifted a forehoof, moved it left and right as he spoke. "This trace, it is repeated all over this place. Whoever or whatever it is, it has had the free passage of this place for a long time."

That sent a chill down my spine. Everyone else's too, judging from the looks of things. Shaw and Galen both glanced around, as if waiting for something to strike from the shadows at that very moment. Liam also looked uneasy.

"I'm not sure you have a problem delivering bad dreams," he remarked. "You're definitely on track to give me nightmares tonight."

"My pardons, Liam. I shall certainly let everyone know if I sense this being approaching us as far in advance as possible."

"This gets more and more curious," I mused, and I got up from the

table. I paced across the tower's stone floor to stand in front of the empty darkness of the hearth. "So there are traces of ethereal energy…and fayleene magic on those darts. This gives me bad feelings on a lot of levels."

Liam's eyes were bright as he stepped forward. "That spell craft on the dart means that Wyeth is involved. I'm sure of it!"

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions a bit prematurely?" Galen asked. "I realize that he is your sworn rival. But sneaking into Fitzwilliam's kingdom and eliminating a member of his court is a bit of a jump for an angry fayleene."

"Nay, not such a jump," Shaw disagreed, with a bristle of feathers. "But only if conflict with Fitzwilliam's kingdom been thy assailant's goal. Had the fayleene wished to weaken this kingdom, t'would have been simpler to target the king. Unlike thy unfortunate captain, King Fitzwilliam's honor has not been besmirched. The new ruler is popular with the people. And he is an experienced battlefield commander."

"In short, a prime target for an assassin who wanted to cripple the kingdom's ability to respond to any threat," I concluded, as I gave the princeling a hard look. "Since Vazura was targeted instead, then this murder was definitely aimed at sabotaging our chances to beat Sirrahon. So tell me, Liam: why are you so sure that Wyeth is the fayleene behind this?"

"I've been sniffing 'round the court the entire past day," Liam reminded me. "It was easy to gain access to all parts of this palace's interior – and exterior. Fayleene are rare guests here to begin with. And since my ascension to Heir, there has been no shortage of courtiers seeking to speak to me or boast of their knowledge of this structure. And it was during one of my many tours that I came upon something quite interesting. Follow me, and I'll show you."

Liam led me downstairs. Shaw and Galen followed, while Destry simply faded through the nearest wall to appear, ghostlike, on the landings ahead of us or at the windows down the hall. To my surprise, the fayleene's path led outside, past the courtyard where Vazura had fallen, and into the royal garden. Lush scents of roses and freshly trimmed grass filled my nostrils as we wound our way through

meticulously maintained walls of climbing roses and beds of fragrant lavender. Fat, golden honeybees buzzed lazily across our way as Liam brought us to the far side of the garden, where one giant rose bush butted up against the emerald curve of a hedge maze.

"The spoor of a scent and the spoor of a spell never lies," Liam stated. "Here, in this spot, is a heavy dose of fey magic. Plus, the scent of a particular stag – Wyeth."

"Maybe we do have a fayleene in league with our ethereal," I murmured. I raised my voice as I called to our pooka. "Destry, can you give this a once-over?"

"Of course I shall," he said, and he bent to sniff around the base of the rose bushes. He raised his head almost immediately and beat his hooves on the soft grass with a muffled clop. "There is no doubt. There is ethereal energy here as well."

"That's not all," I said, and I leaned as far as I dared into the bush without impaling my arm on anything.

Stuck to one of the thorns was a fingernail-sized scrap of dark fabric. It didn't look sun-bleached, or wet from dew, so I suspected that it was fresh. I sniffed it.

My expression darkened as I recognized the smell of Vazura's raw-scented cologne. Since I doubted that the poor captain had been escaping from the dungeon to come look at the hedge maze, that left only one person who would have fabric carrying that man's favored scent.

"As I said, the many people who showed me around wanted to impress," Liam noted. "Sifting through the court gossips of who is mating with whom, I learned that Lady Behnaz has a strange habit: whenever she visits the palace, she likes to come sit out in this part of the rose garden. Every afternoon, like clockwork."

I shaded my eyes with one hand and then craned my neck to look up at the nearby wall. Then I turned back towards the king's residence proper. My mind made a little *click* as it put two pieces of the puzzle together.

"This spot is too close to the outer wall for the guards to see easily," I began. "At least, unless a guard happens to be walking by at

just the right moment, and he's looking straight down. It's hidden well enough so that you can't see it directly from the palace."

"A very good spot to situate a magical portal," Galen said, picking up on my train of logic. "Yes, a very good spot indeed, if one took a few precautions not to be followed."

"What's more, this explains something else: where Wyeth got the information on my family. About my father's murder of a fayleene doe."

"I don't follow."

"I wrote about the incident where Magnus opened a gate into my world," I explained, as I tapped my chin with a finger in thought. "I also mentioned how a fayleene doe came through at the same time – and how my father killed her, thinking that she was a mundane six-point buck."

"You wrote about it in the final case report on how Magnus murdered the Good King Benedict," Galen recalled, with a nod. "Only the king's innermost council got a copy."

"Only a couple of people," I agreed. "But someone leaked it. Lady Behnaz was one of the court ladies who picked up on all the intrigue and gossip in the realm. Child's play at that point to pass the information on to whomever she's meeting on the other side of this portal."

"It must be Wyeth on the other side," Liam reiterated, with an angry stomp of one forehoof.

"Then that's where we need to be. Liam, I need you to trace that spell back to its origin."

His antlered head bobbed fiercely. "I'm on it!"

"Galen, think back to how you and Liam worked together that one time. The time we traced and followed Magnus. I want the same thing now. Liam fixes the location, you bring all five of us through. We're going to steal a march on our opponents, catch them off guard for the first time!"

"I am all for that, Dayna!" Galen said approvingly.

Destry shook his head, and his flaring mane bobbed in the breeze. "You only need to transport four. If an ethereal transports from place

to place under anything but our style of magic, we risk injury. I can follow you by scent of spell and spoor. It will take me slightly longer my way, but I should arrive only a minute or two behind, at most."

"Four it is, then," I allowed.

"Thou must make it three," Shaw said, his voice as glum as I'd ever heard it. "I cannot join thy quest, or aid in thy battle, shouldst one await upon the other side."

I could do nothing but stare blankly for a moment. This was so far outside of Shaw's normal character that I had nothing to say. Liam canted his head, gave his friend a strange look.

"Who art thou?" he said, mimicking Shaw's lingo. "And what have you done with the real Grimshaw?"

"Mock me not!" Shaw pleaded. "Dayna, this shames me to the quick! But I cannot stay to help thee!"

"We won't mock you," I assured him, with a stern glance in Liam's direction. "Whatever your reason is, it must be of great import."

"I returned amongst the griffin elders to speak of Sirrahon. The elders in turn…bound me to an oath of blood and talons. They charged me to stay within the palace's demesne until I spoke with someone else. Someone who could help us with thy dragon, Sirrahon."

"Who?" Liam demanded. "I must know!"

"Alas! That is part of the oath! I was not to reveal them, for they hide their knowledge under a cloak of secrets. And when I do speak to them…if they wish to remain in the dark, I may not draw the curtain back."

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Chapter Eighteen

I groaned. *Another damned binding promise!*

"Fine," I snapped, "I'm not happy about this, but we've wasted enough time."

"I beg thy forgiveness," Shaw moped, and he knelt before me.

In spite of myself, I put my hands out and ruffled his feathery head. "Stop it, you big lug. It's not you I'm unhappy with."

"Maybe we should rethink our plans," Galen cautioned. "Without Shaw, our combat capabilities are markedly diminished."

"Maybe," I acknowledged. I felt the weight of my gun, a heavy and reassuring lump at my side. But I was torn. "Maybe we're rushing this now that we have a solid lead."

"Speak for yourself," Liam shot back. "Ever since I became the Heir, my eyes have not been my own, not entirely."

Galen gave the fayleene a look. "Explain, friend."

"The powers of the Protector…I'm beginning to understand how and why they work. It's as if I'm in tune with the forest itself. Feeling the sun on the leaves of the trees. The satisfaction of the roots as they sip water from underground springs. Seeing and hearing what all the creatures do. The birds of the air, the animals of the ground, even the fish in the streams."

"You see and hear what each does?"

"When I concentrate on one, yes. But otherwise…" Liam's green eye had gone soft, like a moss-covered stone. His brown eye took on a far-away look. "Otherwise, I sense their feelings in general. And right now, they're scared."

A dark look passed between me and our Wizard. "What are they sensing?" I asked.

"That Sirrahon is coming. That the stone dragon is moving their way, as sure as a warm summer is followed by the most bitter of winters."

A coldness settled into my bones then, and we all went quiet for a

moment. Galen rubbed the back of his neck, while Shaw scraped absently at the path with one talon. The moment passed as I spoke up.

"Shaw," I said, "get going. We'll have to do this without you."

"Shouldst any of you fall, fear not: I shall avenge your horrible deaths!" he squawked, and he took to the air, circling wide before heading for the other side of the palace.

I ignored Shaw's affectionate parting for now. Liam stepped forward. His antlers took on a soft, phosphorescent glow. In a couple of minutes, he looked up at us.

"I have it," he pronounced. His noble young stag face looked startled as he added, "This portal leads to…just outside the Sacred Grove of the Fayleene!"

Galen's face darkened. "I will do my best bring us through without arriving in the midst of your kind's fabled grove. Dayna, are you prepared for me to work my spellcraft?"

I took my gun from my shoulder holster. Held it in both hands, at the ready. With a careful deliberateness, I switched off the safety and nodded in Galen's direction.

"I'm good. Let's go for broke."

I felt it as much as heard it. A whisper of magic words came from the Wizard's mouth. The rushing-air sound of Galen's teleportation spell working. I stepped through the flash-bang, rainbow-colored door of Galen's teleportation spell and onto the pine-needle littered floor of the Fayleene Woods with a *crunch*.

Two more crunches, smaller and larger, came from next to me as fayleene and centaur arrived at my side. Scents of pine and peppermint in equal measure. Sunlight dappled its way through the branches and chest-high underbrush. About twenty yards in front of us, a shaft of brightness in the dim forest shone into a small clearing.

At the edge of this clearing, two shapes stood outlined in the bright sunshine. One was the shadowy, indistinct figure of a man. Whorls of dust and streaks of dirt made up the figure's wavering shape. The other figure was tan and white, with the magnificent, muscled body of a twelve-point buck. The sound of their two voices had been deep in discussion, but came to an abrupt halt as my

companions and I arrived.

Wyeth's eyes went wide. "They're here!" he exclaimed. Next to him, the dust-demon creature that had slain Captain Vazura stepped back with an angry hiss.

I hadn't been able to put in much practice with my LAPD-issued handgun in the last three weeks. But I was better with it now than the first time I'd used it in action. I wasn't proficient. But I was familiar, and that was all I needed for this instant.

I brought the gun up. Aimed at the demon thing. Squeezed the trigger.

Wyeth's fayleene reflexes were quicker. He leapt towards us in a lightning-fast bound.

My bullet shattered the upper third of his left antler with a *crack!*

Shards of bone-white antler sprayed into the forest. The force of the slug jerked the stag's head sharply to one side. He skidded on two legs and then went down into the underbrush with a crash.

The demon's legs dissolved into mist as it hovered in mid-air, gaining three or four feet of altitude. It came towards us. A nozzle of swirling fog formed at the end of its outstretched arm. I shouted a warning to my friends as a percussive *thwip* tore through the air.

"*Seiceáil!"* Galen shouted, with a downward wave of his hand.

A dart made of pine-needles smacked into an invisible wall ahead of us and fell to the forest floor. Another hiss from the shadow figure. Galen side-stepped to the left, behind the cover of a twisted knot of scraggly pines.

Wyeth exploded from the dense underbrush and charged at us. The tines of his antlers trailed greenery. The left set had a fresh, jagged edge that poked out like a bone-handled dagger. Liam leapt forward and hit his rival head-on.

The crash-*BANG!* of the two fayleene echoed in the forest as if a glacier had calved a fresh iceberg into the sea. I fell back a step as the wave of sound hit me. Both Liam and Wyeth staggered from the blow. Then lunged back into a clinch like a pair of prize-fighters.

I sighted on the demon figure as it tried to draw a bead on Galen. I squeezed off three more shots. Amazingly, one hit home. The

creature's shape twisted and bulged as a hole formed in its torso, almost cleaving it in two as the bullet tore its way through. Then it pooled back together like spattered drops of water running together down a window pane.

"Galen!" I cried. "Hit that thing with your lightning!"

"Not unless I can get it in the open!" he shouted back. He grabbed a bundle of pine needles and tossed it aside with a curse. "I'll set the forest ablaze if I miss!"

Nearby, the fight between the two fayleene moved back and forth in a choking cloud of green and brown dust. Their hooves churned up dirt and leaf litter as they fought for an advantage. Liam was still smaller than Wyeth, but only by a third. The disadvantage caused by his stunted left antler was matched now by the damage I'd inflicted on his opponent. Because of that, their mutual shoving and bucking made their fight literally swirl as each bulldogged the other to the right. Their constant movement made it impossible to get in a clean shot.

"You're insane!" Liam raged, eyes ablaze as he pushed Wyeth back a half-step. "Working against our people with this…thing! Why? Did you murder our father, half-brother?"

"You accuse me of murder?" Wyeth breathed. "You're the one who's insane!"

"If you are innocent, then yield!"

"Yield? To you, runt?" Wyeth retorted, as he shoved Liam in turn. His voice was a black pit of rage as he spat, "When our father died, all of our people went mad! Thinking that you were better than me!"

"I *am* better," Liam taunted him. "And stronger!"

A grunt from Wyeth in answer. His neck muscles bunched and flexed like steel cords and shoved Liam a full step back. Wyeth reared, slashing razor-sharp forehooves at his rival. One hoof tore a bloody gash along Liam's shoulder. The two circled again, snarling more like wildcats than white-tailed deer.

"When I come home as a hero, then they'll flock to me and abandon you!" Wyeth taunted. "The way you've always been abandoned!"

The sound of approaching voices echoed through the trees. The

beat of fayleene hooves, a lot of them. The sound of the deer-people's bleating alarm. A faint *whoosh* of air, and Destry materialized next to me in a puff of ethereal smoke.

"I am here, *chére*," he said. "We are in battle, I see!"

The demon thing spotted the great black horse. It hissed and then spat out a single sentence to Wyeth in a voice that was insectile, inhuman.

"We go! Now!" With that, the dust-demon vanished into the shadows. Destry let out a ghostly, high-pitched whinny and charged after the creature. He too disappeared in a swirl of mist. Wyeth slashed at Liam once more, and then turned and bounded off into the underbrush. Liam stood his ground, panting, blood streaming from his shoulder.

My mind did another one of its strange *clicks* as it processed what I just heard.

Wyeth had been surprised when Liam had accused him of murder. And I'd seen his reaction back at the Sacred Grove – one of shock and dismay. Wyeth wasn't exactly good at hiding his true feelings, I was sure of that. So he didn't kill the Protector…

But he was ready to return as a hero.

There was only one way that could happen. That meant…

I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Liam, Galen! We have to capture Wyeth! *He knows how to defeat Sirrahon!*"

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Chapter Nineteen

"Galen!" I cried. "Stop Wyeth, any way you can!"

Galen let out a very equine-sounding snort. He glanced around at the trees, the tinder-like carpet of pine needles, and let out a curse. But he murmured an incantation and then flung up one arm to shoulder height. A burning, sooty smell filled the air, coated my tongue. Flavor of peppermint-stripe candy tossed onto a sizzling electric hot-plate. Walls of blue energy winked into existence thirty yards ahead of us, spanning a curve in the shape of a half-moon.

"I can only hold this a few seconds," the Wizard gritted, as he held his hand high. "Any longer, and this entire clearing will burst into flame."

Sure enough, smoke wafted up like steam off hot coffee everywhere Galen's projection touched. Shimmering heat rose from the trunks of trees, from leafy underbrush, from the rug of shed needles that coated everything.

A *wham!* resonated back through the clearing. One of Galen's walls shimmered as something large hit it.

A pause. The sound of hoofbeats rang anew.

Wyeth erupted out of the greenery next to me like a fawn-colored bullet. Liam pivoted, leapt to one side to intercept him. Galen only had time to cry out as he dropped his hand and his barrier spell winked out.

Time stretched to a crawl as my eyes met Wyeth's. His were chocolate brown. But where they should have held the cute gentleness of a deer, there was only savagery. I had both hands down, pointing my gun towards the forest floor. My arms moved, but dream-like, they'd only gotten halfway to their destination before the mad fayleene was upon me.

My face went pale. My knees felt weak.

I took a cue from them and dropped down.

Wyeth's right-side antler razored the air above me, rippling my

hair and making my scalp tingle with a thousand tiny needles of fright. A shower of piney splinters sprayed across my face as the fayleene's weapon gouged a four-inch gash from the tree I'd been standing next to.

And like that, time snapped back into focus.

I rolled, giving my leather jacket a nice coating of fine dust. I ended up on my knees, coughing, eyes streaming, as Wyeth barreled past us. Liam took off in pursuit, Galen hot on his heels. Dammit, I was the only one not on four legs and hooves, but I wasn't about to be left so far behind that I couldn't do anything.

Ignoring my tearing eyes, I took off like a sprinter from the starting blocks. I didn't kid myself that I was gaining on my two friends, let alone our quarry, but if Galen managed to get another wall of energy up ahead of Wyeth, I wanted another shot at him.

Rays of sunlight alternately lit my path or left it in cold patches of shade. I leapt over tangles of tree root. Crashed and stomped my way through underbrush, leaving a trail that even a blind forest ranger could track.

Ahead, the forest grew brighter. Maybe it was thinning out, which would be a good thing. Either we'd emerge outside the Fayleene Woods altogether, or we'd end up in a spot with less fuel for a potential forest fire. And that meant Galen could get his magic mojo on and roast Wyeth like a suckling pig.

Shouts from up ahead. I put on one last burst of speed. Not more than a second or two later, I almost fell as I stumbled to a halt, feet away from where Galen and Liam had come to a stop. Heart pounding, breath wheezing, I looked around.

I caught a glimpse of Wyeth's sleek form ahead. But only a glimpse. A burst of sparkling white magic opened ahead of him, tearing the world asunder. Liam's rival leapt through the portal. It snapped shut behind the stag with the finality of a locked door.

"Oh, *damn* it!" I cursed. "Why didn't you two keep up the chase?"

"The reason should be apparent," Galen said, indicating the area ahead of us.

I let out a gasp. I'd been so focused on Wyeth that I barely

realized that we'd emerged in the midst of the Sacred Grove. Sunlight cascaded through the green vault of arched trees. In front of us lay the shimmer of a preservation spell, as the Protector of the Forest continued to slumber amidst the serenity of the woods. He looked profoundly at ease.

Unfortunately, the looks on the faces of the angry fayleene that stepped out of the woods all around us looked a hell of a lot less sanguine. A wall of sharp antlers materialized around us in a menacing ring. The naturally cute does and stags had their muzzles wrinkled into angry snarls, their brown or green eyes narrowed into angry slits.

The strange bleating noise of the magical deer turned into the chant of an angry mob.

"Rend them! Tear them! Make them bleed, kill them! *Kill them!*"

Yeah, it definitely looked like the fayleene were batting a thousand when it came to treating their visitors courteously.

"Dayna," Galen whispered, "I do not wish to hurt any of Liam's people!"

"You may not have a choice, Wizard," Liam said flatly. "Their emotions are roused at the sight of you two in our most sacred place. I will do the best I can, but be ready."

"Ready? To do what, perchance? Fight or flee?"

"Get a portal spell ready," I said quietly to the Wizard. "Liam, try to keep your people talking. But keep moving over to where they've got Quinval on ice over there. Galen, you and I need to stay close to Liam."

The voice of one of the Lead Does, the female I recognized as Orlaith, boomed over the chant of the crowd. The surrounding fayleene quieted to a rolling grumble as she spoke.

"Heresy, heresy!" Orlaith said, in a voice that was all but a bray. "How dare you taint the sanctity of the Sacred Grove?"

"Oh, really?" Liam replied, with the raise of an eyebrow. "Because it doesn't seem to have affected my powers. My hooves haven't fallen off. And no one's been struck down by the grove's fey magic."

"You are the Heir to the Protector, but you speak blasphemy! Why

do you betray us?"

"Betray you?" Liam demanded, as he slowly paced forward, as if to confront his accuser head-on. Galen and I shadowed every step. The Wizard murmured a string of incantations under his breath, preparing to risk his magic on whatever scheme I had cooked up.

"Yes, betray us! To bring outsiders, inferior beings, where none but our blessed kind should tread!"

The crowd's expression of approval on that one rolled through the audience like a wave of sound. To my surprise, Liam didn't back down one inch. He turned to one side and spat on the grass. A gasp rippled through the assembled fayleene.

"That is what I think of our 'blessed' status! These 'inferior' beings are the only ones helping to stop the doom that draws closer to us every hour." He held his head high and looked down upon the crowd. "And what's more, you *know* it. You know that without my friends among the other peoples, we wouldn't stand a chance! So go ahead. If I have truly blasphemed, then *strike me down and replace me with another stag!*"

Orlaith did nothing but glare at the upstart princeling for a moment. Liam halted by Quinval's side, inches away from the shimmering cloak of the protective spell. I snuck a glance at Galen. He didn't take his eyes off the assembled fey deer, but a whisper came from between his lips.

"I need more time, Dayna! My powers are muted here, in the presence of all this opposing magic!"

"It is true,' Orlaith began, her voice grim. "We of the Lead Does have no wish to replace the Heir. We shall not harm you, Liam."

Liam nodded. "I'm glad that we are finally horn-to-horn on this."

"So we'll only kill the centaur and the human," Orlaith finished. "Surely, you can find others of their kind in King Fitzwilliam's realm."

A chorus of bleating 'Ayes!' and 'Kill the intruders!'

My temper slipped its leash and went forward, full-bore. Not smart, I know. But like I said, I got mad.

"For the record, I've had just about enough of you damned holier-than-thou fayleene!" I declared. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm just

about ready to let this Sirrahon slather you all in barbeque sauce and have at it!"

Orlaith's eyes narrowed. "Flay the flesh from their bones!"

The closest stags reared, razor-sharp hooves flashing in the sunlight. I whipped my gun arm out, aimed high, and squeezed off the trigger again and again. The sound of each shot was magnified into thunder in the cathedral-like space. The front ranks of the fayleene quailed and shrank back from the alien sound.

The gun's magazine clicked dry. I looked to Galen desperately.

"Ready, Dayna!" he exclaimed. "Where to?"

"My world! Directly to the city morgue!" I pointed to where Quinval lay next to us. "Bring the Protector's body with us!"

The Wizard swept his arms out as the fayleene began to rise again. He spoke a sharp phrase of magical words, and the world vanished in a haze of ozone and a flash of white.

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Chapter Twenty

Walls of blank whiteness solidified and shifted to the cheery yellow-brick tiles of the LAPD's morgue. For once, the haze of ozone wasn't replaced with fresh air. Instead, the scents of rubbing alcohol, formalin, and decay pervaded my nose. A soft 'thud' as Quinval's body landed on the floor next to me.

That was followed by a clatter of hooves as Galen staggered for a moment. His forehead banged into one of the room's hanging lamps. The Wizard let out a curse.

Liam gasped in horror, nose wrinkling, eyes wide.

"Wh-what is this place?" the fayleene stammered. "The stench of death…it is everywhere!"

"It's okay," I reassured him. "This is where I do my job."

"You work…here?" He shuddered as he asked, "What crime are you being punished for?"

"Such surroundings are indeed challenging to one's senses," Galen agreed, as he rubbed a tender spot just above his eyebrow. "The aroma does little to improve its ambiance."

"This is where we examine dead bodies," I explained. "So that we can figure out the cause of death. Sometimes, if we're lucky, we can even identify the killer."

Liam nodded his understanding. He swallowed nervously and took a step forward to look at one of the steel examination tables. Thankfully, the table was empty, and the room deserted for the moment. I couldn't count on the latter for much longer, though.

I went to one of the nearby clothes lockers, pulled out two pre-packaged sets of pale green scrubs, and tossed the one marked 'Men – XXL' to the Wizard. "Galen, I need you to switch to your human form. Then get dressed, it'll help us blend in here. Put the gloves on, too."

The centaur nodded. He took a deep breath, as if preparing to plunge into an icy pool of water, and began to recite the lines of his transformation spell. I tore open the clear plastic of my own scrubs

package, shook out the items inside, and began to gown up.

Liam watched intently as I slipped the loose trousers and gown over my street clothes. “Strange garb for stranger work quarters. What will I need to wear to ‘blend in’ here?”

“You’re not going to wear anything. I’ve got no idea how I’m going to explain bringing a white-tailed deer into work. But dressing you up a scrub cap and gown isn’t going to help my case, not unless I’m pleading insanity.”

A fizzy *pop* like a magnum-sized champagne cork going off echoed off the tile. Galen’s superbly muscled, extremely male form gleamed under the lights as he opened his own scrubs package and put on the clothes. The centaur handled the shirt, trousers, gloves, and cap well enough. He looked helplessly at the shoe covers, so I as soon as I’d gowned up, I helped slip them on over his bare feet. With a little luck, the sheer bagginess of the trousers would ensure no one would notice that Galen had no socks or shoes.

“I do hope we won’t spend much time down here,” he remarked. “It is unseasonably cold in these chambers.”

I sighed. “The result of us not having preservation-magic. The scrubs I gave you won’t keep you all that warm, but at least you’ll be street legal.”

“If by that colloquialism you mean that we’ll be able to walk out of this building, I will be more than satisfied. Between our transport and my transformation, I’ve expended all the magic I can tap into for at least the next hour.”

“We’ve got little choice but to make it work,” I said, and I indicated Quinval’s body. “Help me lift the Protector onto one of these examination tables.”

“Fayleene are quite a bit heavier than they look,” he intoned. “Let me handle this.”

With that, Galen knelt and scooped the stag’s body up in his massive forearms. He let out a grunt of exertion as he lifted the dead weight and carefully deposited Quinval’s corpse onto the closest examination table. I went to a nearby cabinet and pulled out an evidence collection kit. Steel forceps and empty syringes gleamed in

the cold light.

"Dayna," Liam asked uneasily, "what are you going to do?"

I pulled up my facial mask and moved to the table. "I'm going to prove once and for all that the Protector of the Forest was murdered the same way as Captain Vazura."

"But why bother? The way the Lead Does were acting…they'll not forgive your trespass in exchange for that information. Let alone your spiriting the Protector's body out of its sacred resting place."

I deftly pulled one of the syringes out of the kit and located the dark path of a vein on Quinval's neck. A quick stab, and I drew out the blood sample I wanted as I replied to Liam's question.

"It's worth it because I need them to see that something bigger is going on here."

"Something bigger?" Liam canted his head at me. "I don't follow."

"This isn't about you, Liam. No matter if you're an outcast or the Heir Apparent. I think this is about all of the fayleene."

His forehoof clacked against the hard floor in annoyance as I used a set of forceps to pluck a single hair from Quinval's side. "This is all Wyeth's doing! He's betrayed both me and my people, plain enough!"

"That's where you're wrong. He's betrayed himself. You saw how he acted at the ceremony. He was just as surprised as you when he learned that the Protector was dead. And just now, he was shocked when you accused him of murder."

The hair went onto a clean glass dish. I took the samples over to the bank of forensic appliances against the wall. While we didn't have the latest equipment down here compared to the Chem Lab, it would do for what I needed. I slid both solid and liquid samples into the appropriate analysis machines before returning to my examination of Quinval's body. I held the forceps ready in one gloved hand. With the other, I began to ruffle through the thick hair that covered the nape of the Protector's neck as I went on.

"But the choice of the Lead Does to bypass him…after he'd dedicated his life to becoming the next Protector? It broke something inside of that stag. In desperation or madness, Wyeth must have allied himself with that demon-thing."

A nod from Liam. “To kill me and take the Protector’s position for himself.”

“That explanation is sorely lacking,” Galen put in. “If your nemesis truly wished you dead, then why did he not have his demon friend murder you, instead of Captain Vazura? From his vantage point, I daresay that he could have targeted his darts at either of you.”

“That’s why I think this is about something bigger,” I agreed. “Whoever we’re up against doesn’t care in the slightest whether you or Wyeth come out on top. They just don’t want you learning how to stop Sirrahon…before the dragon crushes the fayleene.”

The Protector’s heir shook his head as if to clear away the terrible thought. “Wyeth is truly mad, then. Why would he wish for Sirrahon to lay waste to his own people?”

“Because he wants the fayleene to suffer,” I concluded. “Before he gets to save them. Before he gets to be the hero he’s seen himself as all of his life.”

“And what of Lady Behnaz’s role in this? We know that she’s meeting with Wyeth.”

I had no explanation to offer. Right then, my fingers encountered a hard spot under a spot where Quinval’s coat grew the thickest. I brushed the soft wooly underfur out of the way and found a dime-sized bruise. A tiny puncture mark lay in the exact center. A quick probe with the forceps, and I removed a pine-needle dart from the wound. The Wizard and the fayleene stared at the blood-smeared weapon, their expressions as grim as I’d ever seen.

The printer next to the analysis machines started up with a chatter and a whine, making us jump. I placed the dart into a secured sample case, tossed my soiled gloves, and went over to pick up the results. The results were the same, right down to the last tenth of a percentage point, as what I’d seen from Vazura’s samples.

“Sodium cyanide poisoning,” I remarked. “And again, that odd trace of gold.”

“What that trace could portend, I have no idea,” Galen said. “Perhaps it is mere chance.”

“Once is chance. Twice is a pattern. It means something, and I’m

missing it."

A soundless ripple made the air vibrate around us. The Wizard looked about, startled, until a familiar black shape phased into existence. Destry solidified before us, his mane a rough tangle and his spectral sides heaving, as if he'd been galloping full-tilt.

"Our quarry, he is *très rapide*." His voice was strained, breathless. "Not many beings are faster than one of the *pouquelaye*. I am sorry, Dayna, but this demon managed to elude me."

Galen frowned. "That places us back at square one, then."

"Maybe not quite to square one," I mused. "We've just proven that the murder of the Protector and Captain Vazura were connected. It's no coincidence that Sirrahon is showing up when there's no experienced Protector to shield the Fayleene Woods."

"And it's hardly coincidental that we've lost the one man who could have helped us find a way to beat Sirrahon, either."

"We have to find some way," I insisted. "Unless we want to trust to Wyeth showing up in the nick of time to save everyone, we still have work to do."

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Chapter Twenty-One

A rattle came from the door as someone put a key in the lock. Galen and Liam looked to me expectantly. I almost let out a groan. I hadn't been kidding about having no sane excuse for bringing a pair of deer (one dead, one live) into the examination room.

"Galen, just follow my lead," I said quickly. "Liam, no talking. If someone tries to examine you, just…I don't know, make deer sounds."

He blinked. "What sounds do deer make?"

I stared at him. "But…don't you–"

"Fayleene don't keep company with deer! How would I know what they sound like?"

"Just wing it, then," I whispered, as the door swung open.

To my delight, Shelly Richardson stepped through the door. Maybe my luck was starting to turn, at least a little. Her face registered puzzlement as she spotted me, and then it positively lit up as she saw Galen standing at my side.

"Oh my stars and garters!" she exclaimed, as she came over to greet us. "Dayna, you have brought an angel back into our midst."

Galen turned his charm up to eleven as he took her hand and bent to kiss it. "I am indeed lucky to have met you again, Milady Richardson."

"And…and I too, Galen Friesain."

I opened my mouth to correct her, only just catching myself. That had been the name I'd used when I'd first introduced the Wizard to Shelly, after all.

"I'm afraid that we have come yet again at a moment of need," Galen cautioned her.

"Oh, no worries, darlin'. I'm just happy that you remembered me."

"Remembered? And how might one forget a lady as distinguished as you?"

A ghostly chuckle sounded inside my head.

"Ah, *oui*," Destry sighed. "Love, she is at once the most coy and

strange mistress."

I rolled my eyes at that. "Um, Shelly, Galen's right. We're really in a quandary here, but maybe you can help us out."

"Of course, of course." Shelly pulled her gaze away from Galen's, only to have it settle on the soft brown eyes of the fayleene princeling. She walked in front of Liam and put her hand out to pet him. "Aren't you the cutest thing! Are you tame?"

Liam hesitated, and then said, "Moo?"

"He's tame," I hastily put in, as Shelly scratched her head in puzzlement.

My friend snatched her pince-nez glasses from where they hung by a neck chain and gave Liam a closer look. She stroked his head and began examining his hair, his antlers.

"That may be," she agreed, "but he just doesn't sound right. And he's a little small to have such big antlers. If he's ill, I'll need to start by checking his temperature."

Liam's eyes went wide as he looked to me. "Moo! Moo!"

"That's not necessary," I assured her.

Shelly's hand flew to her mouth as she spotted Quinval's corpse, laid out on the examination table. "The poor thing! Must be the stag you were tellin' me about earlier."

"That's him."

She didn't take her eyes off the deer's body as she reached into a nearby bin to grab a pair of latex gloves. Shelly pulled them on and then took hold of the Protector's foreleg. She gave the knee joint a gentle flex. Then she went around to the front of the table and examined the stag's nose, his lips, and even probed the animal's mouth.

"That's dang peculiar," she said, half to herself. "Strange break at that joint. Probably caused during a final convulsion. As to what caused the convulsion, on the other hand…it's something poisonous, all right. That there is a blood flush giving the nasal tissues the unnaturally black look."

I handed her the printouts. "I'd come to that same conclusion."

She let out an amazed whistle as she read the results. "Sodium

cyanide? To kill a *deer*?"

"I didn't say that it made sense. I've been trying to figure out the origin of the poison."

Shelley pulled off her gloves with a *snap*. She tossed them into a waste bin and gave me a stern look. "So you already knew what killed it. And you snuck a live deer in here for what, exactly? Comparison? Come on, if you really needed my help for anything, then you need to throw me a bone here."

My mind raced through a half-different excuses, and discarded them out of hand. I hated not being straight with Shelly, but this entire situation was getting out of hand. A demonic assassin had targeted everyone who would possibly be of help to us in Andeluvia. And there was no telling if that same assassin could strike in this world as well. Destry's presence proved that ethereal beings could travel between worlds.

My mind did one of its weird little *clicks* right then. Why I hadn't made the connection until just now amazed me.

"I brought more than just a couple of deer with me," I admitted. "Because I need your experience as a big-animal vet. I need your help diagnosing a problem that's critical to the world that Galen comes from."

"It's true," Galen said, as he put a mournful tone into his voice. "If Dayna's entreaties do not move you, perhaps mine will? Among my kind, there are the five treatises of mercy, which I need explain at length."

As the Wizard spoke, I motioned to Destry to follow me. The big black horse did so as I walked around to the back side of the freezer unit, out of sight of the rest of the group.

The pooka gave me a curious look. "What is it, *chére?*"

"I need you to go full-on corporeal for my friend to examine you. Can you put some pupils into those eyes of yours? My friend might freak out if she knows you're a full-on nightmare in the flesh."

A nicker. "She is a gentle soul, though not as delicate as you perceive. For you, I shall pass myself off as a normal equine so as not to give her a fright."

"Good. And no talking inside her head, okay? Trust me on this."

"But of course."

A barely-there *whoosh*, and Destry solidified next to me. Galen was just extemporizing on the fourth treatise of mercy as I led the pooka out into the examination room. Now, Shelly had gone mushy at seeing Galen, then positively goo-goo at the sight of Liam. But she let out a squeal of girly delight she watched me bring in a horse that looked as if it could have stepped out of *The Black Stallion*.

"Oh my, oh my!" Shelly rushed over, leaving a now-forgotten Galen and Liam in her wake. She put her hand out, palm up. Destry nuzzled my friend's hand like an ordinary, friendly horse looking for a carrot or sugar cube. "You're gorgeous, simply gorgeous! When I was ten, I had posters of horses just like you all over my bedroom."

A Gallic chuckle sounded in my ears. "Your friend has good taste, no? Beauty, she can be such a burden."

I ignored him. "His name's Destry. And he's the one who needs your expertise."

I quickly related an edited version of what Destry had told me about his phobia. Shelly listened intently as she stroked the black horse's mane. She rubbed her chin in thought as she went to a cabinet on the far side of the room and began rummaging through it.

"Kind of a long shot," she said, as she brought out a miniature flashlight. "But if there's no specific experience that caused his phobia, then we're dealing with something biological in nature. This here is a flashlight that's almost lost its battery. Should be dim enough not to startle him."

"He won't be startled," I assured her. I stepped out of the way as she cooed to Destry, calming him as she gently touched the side of his head with one hand, clicked the light on, and held it near one eye, then the other. Luckily, Destry made sure that his pupils contracted the way a normal horse's would.

"Well, I'll be," Shelly breathed. "It's been a long while since I've seen a case."

Liam, Galen and I traded a look.

"A case of what, pray tell?" Galen asked.

"Moonblink. At least, that's what they called it when I was growin' up." She switched off the light and crossed her arms, considering. "The technical term is CSNB. Short for Congenital Stationary Night Blindness, if you're curious."

I keyed into the first word of the acronym. "So it's genetic."

"Yep. That's why I was surprised to find it. I've seen it mostly in your leopard-spotted variations of the Appaloosa. The rod cells in the retina aren't able to respond to light properly. So even in dim lighting, the world goes completely black for the horse. That's why he's afraid of the dark. He just can't see *anything*."

"Ah," the pooka's voice echoed sadly in my head. "It is as I feared. I am malformed."

"There must be something we can do for it," I insisted. I remembered the thinly veiled threat to have Destry 'unmade', which still made my blood run cold.

Shelly went back to stroking the big black horse's velvety muzzle. "Sure is. It's called vision-impaired equine management. Schedule things so that you won't be ridin' Destry here in the dark. Then remove low-hanging tree branches, file off the sharp wire on the fence, and be sure to fill up the chuck holes in his pasture."

I rubbed my temples again, as if my earlier headache were coming back to haunt me. "That's not going to be good enough. I can't care for Destry that way, not if he's going to be of use. I mean, the people who care for him…they won't accept that."

"Then what kind of care are you giving him, and how are you moving him around?" My friend gave me a very pointed look. "Come on. I know that I'm a soft touch for both good-lookin' men and good-lookin' critters, leastwise anything with a heart and a hoof. But I'll be damned if I can explain how you got a deer, a horse, and a naked hunk of a man past security, let alone into our examination room. So you better talk, and fast."

I swallowed, hard. Then I blurted the first thing that came to mind. "What makes you think I got Galen down here without any clothes?"

"How'd I know? Pshaw!" Shelly directed a thumb in Galen's

direction. “The way that man bulges under those scrubs, there’s no way he’s wearin’ skivvies under ‘em.”

Galen had the sense to move his hands down below, and follow that up with a blush.

Before I could say anything else, the door to the examination room opened again. Shelly hadn’t locked it behind her, and someone must have heard us talking.

That someone turned out to be Bob McClatchy.

The man’s ruddy face took on a bright, unholy shine of pleasure as he stepped forward to take in the view.

“Well, now,” he gloated, “it seems you’re bringing livestock into work now. And you’re doing autopsies on dead animals right on the tables we’re supposed to use for human cadavers! As far as I’m concerned, Chrissie, you just cashed your last paycheck. Because I’m putting my foot down on your *neck*.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

I stepped forward, hands open and entreating.

McClatchy took a step back as I did so, as if I repulsed him.

"Hold on there, Bob," I insisted. "You don't know all of what's going on here!"

"That makes two of us," Shelly muttered, under her breath.

"No, I don't know," McClatchy's chest puffed out as if he were the winner of a prizefight. "And I don't care, not one goddamn bit. All I care about is getting enough dirt on you to wash you out of my hair and out of this department!"

Bob turned away just as the desk phone on the counter next to me rang. The sound of the ringer rattled harshly against the tile walls. Startled, I looked at the device's digital flip-up screen. The extension displayed belonged to the Chief of Police's direct line.

Great timing, I thought. I picked up the receiver more out of reflex than anything else,

"Morgue examination room," I said, as McClatchy headed for the door.

"Put me on the speaker, *chére,*" came Destry's voice.

I almost dropped the receiver right then and there. I shot a glance back towards the pooka, who stood next to Shelly with a placid, utterly mundane equine expression on his face.

"I…how are you…"

"Hurry! Before this *idiote* is out of earshot."

I pressed the button for the speakerphone and set the receiver back down in its cradle. Destry's rich Gallic voice took on a deeper, menacing tone as it boomed out into the room.

"*Leaving this room would be a turn most unkind for your destiny, Monsieur McClatchy!*"

Bob stopped just as he'd put his hand out to turn the doorknob. His head jerked to one side as he heard the command. As if he were a puppet on a set of strings, he spun on his heel and came back towards

us. He approached the counter where the phone sat with a queer look on his face. One that was apprehensive, and yet strangely accepting. As if he'd been expecting this call. He tried to speak, failed, and then cleared his throat to try again.

"Who are you?" he rasped.

"Come now. Unless we have miscalculated your intelligence, you should know exactly who I am. Who *we* are."

McClatchy swallowed nervously. "What am I to call you, then?"

Destry let out the gritty, amused laugh of a villain straight out of the 40's radio serials. "You may address me as 'The Monseigneur'. Yes, the conspiracy you suspected all your life is true. We have been watching you and shaping your course, nudging you where needed."

I looked around as Destry went on. Liam shook his head, while Galen made the tiniest of shrugs. They had no idea where this was going, either. Shelly, on the other hand, was listening as intently as Bob. She leaned forward, one hand pressed to her mouth, as Destry continued to hammer home his credibility as the mysterious benefactor in McClatchy's life. And the pooka was doing it with the best evidence of all: the man's own memories.

"Think back to the times you always felt things were going against you," Destry continued. "The time you studied all night for your high-school chemistry exam, and botched it all the same. Or that girl in college, the one with hair of gold and lips the sheen of ripe strawberries, whose father offered you a pile of bills to forget about her. Perhaps you remember each and every time someone blocked your way to become the 'top dog' here. Preventing you from fulfilling what you have known to be your true calling: power."

"It's been you…all along…" McClatchy whispered.

"*Mais oui.* It has been us. It has been me. A steady diet of success produces plants that grow fast, but weak and spindly. We have forged you tougher, better with each failure."

"I knew it! I knew you had a plan for me, Monseigneur!"

"But now you have crossed a line, Robert. You are not doing what we want by delaying Dayna Chrissie."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

Destry's voice dropped even further. Into a cold, flat tone that brooked no argument.

"Stay out of her way. You will leave here now. Do not speak to anyone. Go home. Go to bed. Consider how you might treat others, in a way that shall not bring you to our bad graces ever again. When you wake up, you will only remember what happened here as a *mauvais rêve*. A bad dream."

"A bad dream…" Bob repeated. His face had gone pale, his eyes glassy.

"Now, go!"

McClatchy stumbled out of the room like a zombie.

To my surprise, Shelly moved to follow him.

I caught her wrist, but she shook me off. Her eyes weren't glassed over like Bob's, but her face had taken on a strange, waxy appearance. She reached in her pocket and then shoved a fistful of keys into my hand. I recognized the metallic bundle as the keys to all the rooms, cabinets, and closets on this level.

"Dayna, I…I need to go home now. I feel funny," Shelly said, as if to herself. "I really need to take a nap. But something is telling me that you need these right now. Just…leave them on my desk when you're done, okay?"

I nodded helplessly. "Okay, Shelly. Will do."

I followed alongside my friend as she walked robotically to the door, then watched her as she made her way slowly up the building's stairway. Keys jingling in hand, I found a supply closet and located a marker, a roll of tape, and a pad of paper.

In a few moments, I taped a sign marked 'CLEANING – DO NOT ENTER' to the outside of the examination room door. Then I went through, locked the door behind me, and found a chair to jam under the knob for good measure.

Only then did I finally let myself relax.

Liam chuckled. "That was quite a performance, Destry."

"And I had no idea that the pooka were so adept at improvisation," I concluded, as I rejoined my friends. I looked at the big black horse with more respect now.

“As I told you, McClatchy truly believes that the world is holding him back from whatever he is destined for,” Destry said. “It is a common, mild delusion, but in this man…it is much, much stronger. So I gave him a shadowy figure, a *personnage* to put to his fantasies, and *voila!* It was all in good fun.”

Galen raised an eyebrow. “More than ‘good fun’, I would venture. Playing on a person’s fears to magically manipulate them…that was extremely potent, subtle magic.”

“I picked up on his thoughts, amplified the fears,” Destry demurred. “It had to be done. I regret nothing.”

“Indeed.” The Wizard kept his expression neutral, but the skepticism in his voice spoke volumes.

Destry cleared his throat and pawed the ground. “A change of subject, then. Since we have the answer we wanted from the Protector, shall I return him to his resting place in the forest?”

“How?” I asked. “I thought you couldn’t transport anyone.”

“I am unable to transport living beings, which he is not.”

Liam nodded vigorously when I glanced at him for confirmation. So I got out a new pair of gloves and with Galen’s help, we draped Quinval’s body across the pooka’s back.

“We appreciate all of this help,” I said, as I patted Destry on his flank. “If you get the chance, see if you can speak to the fayleene. Try to get them to understand why we did what we did. And what we found.”

“I shall try. And afterwards, shall I seek you in this world, or elsewhere?”

“As soon as Galen’s ready, we’ll return to Andeluvia.”

The pooka inclined his head towards us. “That shall be enough for me to track you by the spoor of your spell. I shall see you *anon*.”

The air rippled soundlessly as he faded away, taking Quinval’s body with him.

“This display of power by our equine friend troubles me,” Galen said, as soon as Destry had completed his vanishing act. “I am no expert on ethereal creatures, but even so…”

“Why the concern?” I gave the Wizard a hard look. “He’s proven

unexpectedly helpful, I think."

"Perhaps. Maybe it is not the extent of his power, but his ability to use it with precision. Or the lack thereof."

"From what Dayna told us, this 'Destry' is extremely young," Liam pointed out. "Likely what he lacks is experience. How is the pooka's 'precision' lacking?"

"Spells that alter perception and play with memory are tricky at best." Galen rubbed his arms through the thin fabric of his scrubs, trying to keep warm. "I think it's likely that Destry's magic may have opened a door in McClatchy's mind that should have stayed firmly shut. And as for precision…I don't think our friend intended to cast his spell to ensnare Shelly Richardson as well. Yet she also fell under the compulsion to go home and sleep, probably to wake and think upon this as but a dream."

I bit my lip in thought. Maybe Galen had a point. But I had bigger fish to fry right then.

"Galen," I said, "when you blip us back to Andeluvia, can you bring us to somewhere outside the Parliament chambers?"

"Certainly. Why there, if I may ask?"

"Simple. We're still no closer to identifying our killer," I said firmly. "Destry's lost the demon's track, and we've lost Wyeth's. So we have only one move left."

"That being?"

I gave him a grim, determined smile. "I'm betting that's where we'll bump into Grimshaw. Because we're going to find out what he's learned about stopping dragons."

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Chapter Twenty-Three

The three of us arrived in one of the courtyards of Fitzwilliam's palace, announced by a blaze as bright as a hundred flash bulbs. I staggered and fell to one knee, but we'd landed on the soft turf between the paved pathways. I got up, did my best to brush off the grass stain that I'd acquired on the knee of my slacks, and nodded brusquely at a pair of royal pages who stared at us in unabashed surprise.

Well, I guess I couldn't exactly blame them. Our arrival was rather showy by anyone's standards, even in a land where magic was a relatively expected occurrence. The two teenaged boys, each garbed in cloaks the color of a robins' eggs, rushed off to share our arrival as the latest gossip. Not that I minded. The fewer people around to try their hand at spying on us, the better.

Liam stretched his long, skinny deer legs and breathed deep. "Oh, joyous day! How wonderful to be out of that crypt of the dead, to have fresh air in one's lungs again."

"Much as your world fascinates me," Galen added, "I must agree with our fayleene friend. Though it does rather puzzle me why you would wish to arrive here, of all places. Did Grimshaw place a well-hidden hint with you?"

"He gave no hints," I agreed. "Shaw's a griffin's griffin, when you come right down to it. There's no way he would let slip anything, at least intentionally."

The early afternoon sun came out from behind a cloud, illuminating gray marble walls that made up the palace proper. Sunlight glinted off the sides of the dunce-capped tower off to one side, but all I had eyes for was the three-story Parliament building to our front. It was remarkably ugly, being sheer-sided and windowless.

High above, wooden beams jutted up from the topmost story to make up the raw structure of an A-frame roof. It made the upper stories open to the sky, but that was just fine for the beings that

worked inside.

The muffled sound of heavy wingbeats came from inside the walls of Parliament. A few seconds later, Shaw's white-and-gold form burst from under one of the open A-frame bars and shot high into the air. The griffin let out a squawk of surprise as he spotted us below.

Shaw banked to one side and then made a neat pivot on one great white and black-tipped wing. With a flare of feathers, he came to earth beside us. His normal scent of warm leonine fur was overlaid with the faint smell of fresh-baked pastry, and a few buttery crumbs of some delicacy clung to the side of his beak. It added just a touch of whimsy to his warrior's face.

"Thou hast returned!" Shaw exclaimed, and he made a slight bow as he greeted us. "So pleased am I that none of you were killed by whatever foes lay o'er the far side of yon mysterious portal."

"Not for lack of trying," I remarked, and the griffin perked up at that.

"We came upon Liam's rival, Wyeth," Galen said. "He was in consultation with the demon-thing that killed Captain Vazura."

Shaw's stern eagle face went positively grim. "'Ere my falling out with Vazura, he was my Captain. I shall not swear vengeance for one I did not hold in utmost regard. But he was a brother in arms, which means that both deer and demon's life is forfeit, should either chance to fall within reach of my talons."

"I don't think any of us would object," I said, and I related what happened in the fayleene's sacred grove and our brief travel to the LAPD's morgue. Shaw listened attentively, though he grew agitated and pawed the ground as I related our discoveries.

"Shamed and envious I am, that thy journeys had more adventure than mine. And to view that strange world of Dayna's again would have been a treat for one such as I."

"You didn't miss much," Liam insisted. "We remained inside a single room, one that stank in a way that would make a carrion-bird gag."

A shrug from the griffin. "All battlefields carry the same fragrance after heroes have spilt their blood in the service of honor."

“Speaking of scents,” I put in, “I’m smelling baked goods on your fur. How was your meal with the Albess?”

Shaw blinked. “Thou knowest? T’was Albess Thea, indeed. She hath allowed me to reveal her as the one I consulted.”

“It also looks to me like she’s allowed you to sample some of the delicacies supplied by Fitzwilliam’s court.”

The griffin looked a little embarrassed at that. “Lucky I was to leave, before mine own belly grew too plump to fly.”

That got a chuckle out of me despite myself. Fitzwilliam’s kingdom was a monarchy, but it wasn’t an absolute one. I’d learned in my first visit that the king acted as the executive branch. But the writing of the laws and the kingdom’s purse strings were controlled by a quasi-legislative branch called the Parliament.

Only one species made up the Parliament in this world: a well-catered-to bunch of magical owls led by Albess Thea. I’d met with the Albess during my investigation into the former king’s murder, as well as afterwards. She was a unique and gentle soul, and I counted her as a friend. And it was her special quirks that made me realize that Shaw was coming here.

“Regardless of how pleasantly plump Shaw has gotten, I am curious how you divined Shaw’s luncheon companion,” Liam put in. “I could spend an entire evening listing my griffin friend’s flaws, but breaking his word to keep silent would not be on the list. How did you know he would be here, Dayna?”

Shaw let out a deep leonine grumble. “‘Pleasantly plump?’ A strange way thou hast with words, fayleene.”

I smoothed Shaw’s ruffled feathers, quite literally, by stroking his brow as I spoke. “No one doubts a griffin’s word once given. And even among griffins, our Shaw is not one to miss out on a chance to prove his valor.”

Said griffin purred like a happy kitty-cat at that. I gave him a final scratch under his chin as I went on. “Shaw was charged to stay within the palace’s demesne until he spoke with someone. If that someone was one of the nobles here, it wouldn’t have taken more than a few minutes. When he begged off going with us, it meant that Shaw

thought he'd be stuck here for a long while."

A nod from Shaw. "For the crisp of the evening, at least!"

"And since there's only one group of beings around that wake to do their work after sunset, I made an educated guess."

"It's barely two hours past the noon sun," Galen pointed out. "That's not hard by the sun's setting time, I would venture."

"A good point," I said. "But I know that Thea has a most surprising affliction for a nocturnal bird: *insomnia*."

"'Tis true," Shaw agreed. "Thy friend the Albess was waiting for me when I arrived upon the nonce. She was gracious and hospitable, even to one of such vast difference as I. Her words came easier to mine own ears than that of other owls I have chanced to meet."

That didn't surprise me. The owls were considered exceedingly odd creatures, even for Andeluvia, because of their mode of speech. They rarely if ever spoke directly about anything, preferring to play hide-and-seek with metaphors. Even stranger and more confusing to most was their reluctance to use the word 'I'. Thea was the only owl I'd met who didn't share her species' verbal quirks.

"The Albess spoke to me in private," Shaw continued, "and she plied my appetite with dishes aplenty."

I grimaced as I recalled the meal that I'd eaten the first time I'd visited Parliament. "Did she make you try the 'mouse tart'?"

"Nay, the day's menu lacked that delicacy. I did try others: mouse stew, mouse flan, mouse in savory meat jelly, and mouse blood pudding." The griffin shuddered. "Alas, that final dish was terrible. Not nearly enough mouse in it."

"Never mind that," I said, as I waved the memory away. "Did she have anything to say about Sirrahon?"

Shaw coughed. "In a fashion."

"That is singularly unhelpful, friend," Galen said, crossing his arms.

The griffin rubbed the side of his head with his paw as he complained, "Yon Abbess began by asking *me* a barrage of questions. Not about dragons. About Dayna."

"Me?" I asked, startled.

“Aye. She asked me what I thought of you, whether you used heart or brain or gut to make decisions. More than once, she asked what I thought of your mettle. I replied forthrightly as I could. Methinks I spoke well enough in a hard spot, for in the end she told me about Sirrahon. That she had no knowledge of how to stop thy monster, but she knew who did.”

“Oh, great.” I kicked at the turf with my shoe toe. “This is starting to feel like an old-fashioned snipe hunt.”

“Knowest I not of snipe, but they must be most troublesome beasts. For the Albess revealed to me that the one to speak with was ‘The Old Man of the Mountain’.”

Galen let out a gasp. “Thea said to speak with…” A chill raced down the small of my back as the Wizard’s face took on a fearful cast. “Dayna, there is a legend I heard from Good King Benedict. Of an ancient spirit that lives atop the mountain to the north of the palace. A spirit that knows many things of the past and the future, a spirit that observes all there is to see.”

“Okay, I get the picture,” I sighed. “We have a freelance oracle on our hands. But if he’s atop the nearest mountain, how far away could he be?”

The Wizard pointed up towards a peak that was just visible from where we stood. The summit rose above the walls, high but devoid of snow. The way looked steep and rocky, but surprisingly within reach. “A few hours away, if one has a reasonably solid mount.”

“That close? Then why don’t the locals go up and talk to him on a regular basis?”

“In the first place, because the Ancient Guild of Soothsayers discouraged it.” Galen’s lips curled into a wry expression as he added, “They claimed that the Old Man’s half-baked prophecies were inaccurate, which could make people distrust real predictions from approved-of prognosticators.”

“I get it. Short answer: It’s bad for business. Theirs.”

“Even so, there is another reason, one that made me pay heed. It is said that seeing the Old Man puts one in the utmost peril for one’s life.”

Shaw nodded vigorously. “The Albess spoke of much the same thing. In fact, she beseeched me to make this risk known to Dayna.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I have you three to back me up,” I said, putting on a brave face. “Didn’t Shaw once say that we can out-run, out-fly, out-fox, or out-fight anything?”

“Thou hast touched on the most troubling thing spoken to me by the Albess,” Shaw intoned. “I said as much to Thea, but she bade me silent with a wave of one wing. And then she insisted that I make one thing clear: That our deaths were nigh certain…unless Dayna spoke to the Old Man by *herself*.”

The chill that had run down my back climbed back up into my gut, tied itself into an icy knot, and settled into my stomach for a nap.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

The huge knight bearing the sign of a white half-moon on his shield scowled at me. Though he wore the natty red and black uniform of the palace guard, his dark, shaggy beard was in need a good trimming. His face had a youthful arrogance, and his eyes held all the warmth of a cop who'd just pulled someone over for speeding through a school zone.

"King Fitzwilliam is out hunting," the man explained irritably, "and I do not recognize you as either a noblewoman or the holder of a royal appointment. So be off, before I call my captain."

"You may not recognize me," I replied, trying to keep my temper in check, "but surely you remember the Court Wizard?"

Galen stood behind me, his face set in a dark scowl. This had been enough to make Bob McClatchy reconsider some strong words to me, but it didn't have any effect on this charter member of the idiot brigade.

"Oh, aye. Him, I remember. Though when the king is absent, the Wizard's status is simply that of the centaur monarch's unwelcome whelp. Should we need someone for puppetry or pony rides, then I shall call upon you."

Something akin to a growl came from Galen's throat. But before I could open my mouth and cause any more trouble, a second knight, an older man wearing gold-trimmed plate armor, stepped into the hallway next to us with a *clank*.

"What is the cause of this commotion?" His voice was deep, curt.

"Malingerers, sir," the first knight said, and though he inclined his head with a short bow, his gaze never left his superior's face. "I was just seeing them off."

In a flash, I recognized the man in gold-edged armor. The Commander of the Palace Guard had been present when I'd unmasked the Good King Benedict's murderer, and he'd helped me take both Captain Vazura and Lord Behnaz into custody.

“Commander Yervan,” I greeted him, “I hope you won’t turn away a fellow servant of King Fitzwilliam.”

Yervan’s grizzled expression was grim, but his face held enough room for smiles as well as frowns. “I see you, Lady Chrissie,” he said kindly. “Though I daresay you don’t count yourself a servant of anyone.”

Galen coughed politely into his hand at that. My reputation preceded me, I guess.

“I have been charged by the king to bring the murderer of Captain Vazura to justice, and I need help in following up the best lead I have.”

Admittedly, that was a slight stretch. But the party that killed Vazura was the same one that didn’t want me finding out about Sirrahon. So it *was* related, so far as I was concerned.

Yervan straightened up as he absorbed the information. “If you’re on a king’s mission, then simply speak what you need.”

“A mount from the royal stables. Preferably something steady of nerve and not too fiery. I’m going to be climbing mountain trails, not heading into combat.”

“You shall have it.” Yervan motioned to his subordinate. “Sir Ivor, bring a mount hither that meets Lady Chrissie’s requirements.”

He got a snort in reply. “Fetch a mount for a peasant outworlder and one of the horseborn?”

“Perform your duties, boy. Or I’ll assign you to fetch slop for the royal pigsty.”

To my surprise, instead of further insubordination, Yervan got a salute before the man went off at a trot. The Commander made a shallow bow in Galen’s direction.

“Apologies, Wizard. This ponce of a lord’s son is new to the guard. In time, we shall mold him into shape, the way a blacksmith beats out a sword.”

“Accepted,” Galen replied. “Let us hope the metal hasn’t set hard enough to blunt the hammer.”

Yervan turned his attention back to me. “Since all our horses rightly belong to the king, might I ask how this mount will allow you

to ‘follow up your best lead’?”

I traded a look with Galen before answering. “The best lead I have is to speak to someone called ‘The Old Man of the Mountain’.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow at that. “Those are dark tidings. Are you sure that you do not wish an escort of knights?”

Yeah, *that* offer didn’t make me feel any better about where I was going. But I wasn’t about to ignore what Albess Thea had told Shaw.

“I’ll have a wizard, the Heir to the Fayleene throne, and a battle-tested griffin with me. I should be fine.”

“I concede the point.” The older knight rubbed his chin with a gauntleted hand. “Yet there have been disturbing reports from all along our borders as of late. Tales of strange fires in the distance, sounds like two armies clashing from the next valley over. Scouts who’ve touched ne’er a drop of mead in months are coming back with stories of trees as big around as a house, ripped out of the ground by the roots.”

I swallowed. “Those sound like darker tidings than I have to deal with, Commander.”

“Mayhap. Yet my instincts tell me that something is afoot.”

* * *

The Commander was as good as his word, and in no time I had a freshly kitted-out gray mare to ride. Though the afternoon remained fair, it did little to lighten my mood. Thea’s warning kept playing through my mind.

But while I’d meet this ‘Old Man’ alone, I’d be damned if I was going to travel through open country under these dark omens without an escort. Galen led the way through the palace gates and up along the northern paths. Liam trotted alongside my horse while Shaw soared above, scouting ahead and reporting back to us at regular intervals.

The bulk of the city surrounding Fitzwilliam’s demesne stretched to the south and east. So we passed through relatively few streets and attracted less attention from the citizenry as we galloped by. Outside the city proper, the rows of houses gave way to smaller and smaller cottages, separated by wide fields of golden wheat.

Eventually, these gave way to a forest of rowan and ash trees. Then the forest landscape shifted into different types of pine as the road began to slope upwards into long switchbacks. We forded a trio of small streams and began to pick our way across wide banks of thumbnail-sized gravel washed down from the mountains.

The way wasn't rough going, not exactly, but my horse had to pick her way amongst piles of ankle-turning stone at points. Liam and Galen had to do the same. Still, Liam's normally cheerful countenance had taken on a painfully worried cast. That concerned me almost as much as the ill tidings about the route we were on.

"What is it, Liam?" I asked. "Are the…I guess, the animals in your 'service' still telling you anything?"

"That's what has been bothering me," the fayleene admitted, as he clambered over the latest gravelly rise. "I'm not getting much of anything anymore. Brief flashes here and there. No panic, I think. But I sense a lot of movement. Deeper into the core of the wood."

My horse stumbled on the far bank, sending down a shower of pebbles as she fought to keep upright. Galen turned back and helped steady my mount.

"Careful," he warned, "this is all loose. It's mine tailings from upriver."

We took it slower after that. The gravel-strewn banks fell behind and the tree cover began to fail. A chill wind blew up as we left the last line of trees. Only stunted, thorny shrubs as high as a man sprouted between the tumbled landscape of boulders.

Another half-hour passed in silence as we picked our way through the boulder fields. Shaw landed next to us as we approached a silent gray ceiling of fog. The griffin eyed it with a growing unease as we drew closer. Finally, as we reached a jagged outcropping at the edge of one switchback, he called a halt.

"Stay thy mount," Shaw announced. "Bide a moment."

It was as good a spot as any, I supposed. I dismounted and then leaned out carefully over the edge. Felt the updraft whistle through the strands of my hair. Far, far below, the trail notched its way back and forth down the slope, disappearing into the dark green line of

trees. Even further out, the gravel banks were a tan scar wrapped in the silvery braids of rushing water. Off towards the horizon, the battlements of Fitzwilliam's palace jutted up from the surrounding hills like the prow of a huge gray ship.

Galen rummaged through his saddlebags. He pulled out a water bag made of sewn goatskin and gave it to me. I gratefully squeezed out a stream of clean, but lukewarm water into my mouth and swirled it around. The Wizard then passed out handfuls of wrinkly green apples, which we all accepted gratefully. Liam was able to crunch one down in four bites; Galen needed only two, while Shaw's jackhammer beak handled a half-dozen in the blink of an eye. Me, I decided to savor the granny-smith tartness of whatever breed of apple tree this came from.

"Humble fare, I realize," Galen said. "But all I could acquire on short notice from the palace stores. I earnestly hope that you'll be able to find this Old Man prior to sunset. I don't think we'll be able to pick our way back down in the dark."

"I should be able to return on my own," Liam pointed out. "But unless you wish to send word back to the court, we are stronger together than apart."

"The fayleene speaks true," Shaw put in. "I could chance a flight, ere nightfall. Wizard, perhaps your magic would suffice to bring the rest of the party back?"

A shake of the head. "Not until after moonrise, at least. Transportation is one of the costliest spells in my repertoire, and we've been draining my magic dry all day today."

"I understand, Galen." I rubbed my thigh muscles, felt the dull ache that came from riding. My body wasn't quite as green as it had been the first time I'd done long-distance riding in this world. But the saddle was still making my backside pretty sore. "Whenever we want to continue, I'm ready to roll."

A cough from the griffin.

"I think that thy way from here should be on foot. And alone."

My voice sounded tinny, weak. "We must be closer to the summit than I realized."

“Aye. It’s not far along this trail. And it is strange…” Shaw cocked his head to one side, as if that would help change his memory. “Perhaps my senses grow tricksy. For a moment, I thought the fog parted. A sole ray of sunlight illuminated a flash of red and silver. The gleam of a pair of amber-colored eyes hidden in the mist.”

Rocks clattered as Liam leapt to his feet and blocked the path.

“Dayna, this isn’t right. There’s something bad up there, I can feel it.” He tossed his head, bone-white antlers bright against the mist above. “I should be the one to go. All of this has been because of me.”

Galen and Shaw went silent, eyes riveted on what I would say or do next.

“No, Liam.” I sighed. “I don’t like this either. But I’m the one who should go up…because Wyeth was right.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father slaughtered one of your people for no good reason, save that of ‘sport’.”

“We’ve talked about this.” Liam came to stand before me. His liquid eyes bored into mine. “It wasn’t your fault! You have nothing to prove.”

The screams of the fayleene from my earlier nightmare echoed in my head as I spoke. I cursed Destry’s ‘Dream Speaker’ and all her ilk.

“I think I do.” I touched the side of my head. “Up here, I know I’m not at fault. But down inside, that old murder gnaws at me. I can’t escape it. And I have confidence in Thea’s wisdom. If she says it’s dangerous for anyone but me to go up there, I’m going to trust her call.”

“You really have that much faith in her?”

“Why not?” I quirked a grin at my deer friend. “She’s the one who sent me to find you when I most needed a fayleene, after all.”

Liam stepped aside.

I walked further up the path, leaning into the narrow, steeply slanting slope. A gust of wind pulled the mist down around me. It cut off the view of my friends as if some celestial stagehand had pulled down a somber gray curtain. I went on, feeling the wetness in the air turn to beads of clear moisture against my skin, on the tips of my hair.

I went on. Despite the moist air, my tongue still felt strangely dry. It didn't help wash out the leathery taste of the water from the skin bag, though. Sounds became muted as I continued along a seemingly endless corridor of vapor. All I could hear was the crunch of my shoes over rock, the wheeze of my breath, and the dull throb of my heartbeat in my eardrums.

Suddenly, I spotted the glint of gold just ahead. I picked up my pace for a moment, and then froze in my tracks. A single shaft of sunlight carved its way through the mist from left to right, illuminating a wide, tumbledown summit of multicolored stones. The ray shone as brilliantly through the mist as a spear of light down a mine shaft.

It took me a moment to understand exactly what I was looking at.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

The late afternoon sunlight cleaved through the fogbank that clung to the summit. It cast a bright yellow glow over a vine-draped granite boulder the size of a pretty hefty passenger car. A flash of amber and silver caught my eye.

A magnificent silver fox perched atop the rock like a king receiving visitors. The animal's lush pelt carried patches of red against silver. A wise, knowing face framed amber eyes. The effect was spoiled a bit by its lolling tongue as it sat panting from some recent exertion.

I should have known. Little was as it seemed in the realm of Andeluvia, and I'd met more than one sentient animal in my travels. I bowed respectfully to the 'Old Man' and introduced myself.

"Greetings, wise one," I stated formally. "I am a traveler from a world far from here, but I have come seeking your wisdom."

The fox simply looked at me without a shred interest. It continued to pant.

I tried again. Maybe the animal was hard of hearing.

"Greetings, wise one!" I began, this time raising my voice to a near-shout.

But before I could go on, the fox scratched one ear with the stretch of a rear leg and got up. Without any ceremony, it wandered off into the surrounding mist. I called after it, not sure if I should chase it down. Somehow that didn't seem all that polite.

Then I felt a strangely familiar movement of air. The warm, masculine voice of every kid's favorite grandfather echoed in my ear.

"How curious," the voice said. "Why in all of Andeluvia are you speaking to the fox?"

Startled, I looked around. No figure loomed up out of the fog, and yet the voice sounded very close.

"Um…I was looking for the Old Man of–"

"Yes, yes," the voice said wearily, and with a touch of impatience.

“The Old Man of the Mountain. You’d think that after all these centuries, someone would come up with a better name. I mean, I’m not a man. Or a woman. Or anything else gendered, for that matter.”

I scratched my head in confusion. “But the fox…”

“Look a little lower.”

“But…I don’t see anything but a big…”

I almost smacked myself in the forehead right then.

“Of course. I should’ve figured that in this world, the ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ would have to be a rock.”

“Spirit stone, if you please.”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“I don’t either. For example, I should offer you something to eat or drink out of common courtesy. But we’re pretty far from the nearest alehouse.” The grandfatherly voice dropped to a stage whisper. “And besides, I’m a *rock*. We don’t really get out and about much.”

I stifled a laugh. This whole scene was getting rather surreal, but I found myself liking the old codger.

“My name’s Dayna. Instead of just calling you ‘Old Man’, do you have a name I can use?”

“In Old Granite, my name is twenty-seven words long. Maybe you could come up with something better for our personal use.”

“Okay,” I thought furiously for a moment, and then settled onto the most obvious thing that came to mind. “How about…Rocky?”

At that, the spirit stone made something like a snort.

“Fine. A tad unimaginative, but fine. Well, I doubt that a yearling human cub like yourself just wandered up here for the fresh air. What did you come to see old Rocky for?”

“Well, I had a couple of questions. And I suppose the first is… look, are you going to try to harm me? Your reputation isn’t what I would call sunshine and rainbows.”

A sigh. “Please take a close look at me. Note the conspicuous lack of arms needed to swing a sword. Hands to thrust a spear. And in particular, the lack of legs to chase you with.”

“Yet people say that speaking with you is perilous.”

“Yes. It is.”

Prickles ran up my arm as the stone admitted it as plain as day.

The grandfatherly voice continued. “People say I’m perilous because I don’t tell them what they want to hear. And nothing is more perilous to a closed mind than the truth.”

True enough, I thought, but did my best to keep my guard up. *This creature wouldn’t know it, but I’d learned from Liam and Destry that you didn’t need arms to cast a spell.*

“You bring up a good point, Rocky. My second question is…what do you know about a dragon named Sirrahon?”

“My goodness! That is a rather dark thing to talk about. Why not instead ask me about how to make your own diamonds? All you need is some coal and a handy volcano–”

“Sorry, but I’ve been through a lot just to get this far. I need to know about this dragon.”

“Very well,” Rocky acknowledged. “Sirrahon is one of the oldest, mightiest of his kind. Truly, a dragon that one does not wish to oppose.”

I nodded. So far, nothing that I hadn’t heard before. Luckily, my stone companion went on.

“Even his name is fraught with meaning. In the Old Speech, ‘Sirrahon’ means ‘standard-bearer’. Or ‘herald’ if you will.”

I was starting to get that sinking feeling again. The feeling joined the chill I’d gotten earlier and decided to time-share my stomach. “Herald for what, exactly?”

“Why, the rest of his kind, of course. That he has awoken is no accident. And like the other horrific beings of the Dark, if one falls, others will rise take their place.”

That almost made me let out a groan. Yeah, I was sure that those very words would surface in some later nightmare.

“Okay. Let’s just put aside the whole ‘rising beings of the Dark’ thing for a moment. It’s too much for me to even consider for the moment.”

And oddly enough, that *was* exactly how I felt. The events of the day had begun to blur in my mind. Robbed me of some of my sharpness. I wanted nothing more than to just get this whole thing

over with, and to do that, I only had one question that mattered a damn.

"Look," I said, with as much firmness as I could muster, "How do we stop Sirrahon?"

Silence fell heavy as Rocky seemed to ponder his answer.

"There is only one way I know of…and it will require death, perhaps many deaths, to acquire it."

Normally, a pronouncement like that would have given me a bad case of the chills. But again, whenever I tried to think off the beaten path of 'stopping Sirrahon', things went fuzzy.

"In ages past, there was a book. A recounting of the last Great War of Andeluvia. It is the *Codex of the Bellum Draconus*, and it contains both the secrets of that war, and a prophecy."

This time I really did let out a groan. "Oh, come on. Why is there always a prophecy tied into these kinds of things?"

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," Rocky pointed out, "the Codex was written long in the past, so the 'prophecy' should be the same as present-day news."

"I never thought of it that way. I guess to someone in the past, the present was somebody's future prediction."

"Those who wrote the Codex hid it near what is now called the Grove of the Willows. It is where the centaurs and the humans gather to make their treaties and alliances."

"I'm familiar with the place." I pushed back against the fuzzy feeling in my brain enough to ask, "Why doesn't anyone know about this? I mean, this sounds like a pretty important book. People working for Benedict or Fitzwilliam, or the archivists in the kingdom's library…"

Another snort from the spirit stone. "Only humans have the arrogance to assume that they are the sole people who have created books. The Codex is from a time long ago. So long ago, that it was the time before humans or centaurs were doing more than scratching out a living on the barren plains and fields far to the south. Their kingdoms are mere striplings compared to the Old, Dark Powers!"

"Well, if this book contains secrets from that war, we need to get

our hands on it. I know where this grove is, but can you get any more specific?"

"Alas, yes. For that is where death must pay for life. Look into the recent past with me."

The air next to me swirled as the mist coalesced into a mirror-bright surface. In it, I saw the cover to a huge moss-green book. A pair of female hands grasped it, pulling it out from where it rested in a stone chamber under the gnarled roots of an old willow tree.

The view pulled back to reveal the woman who held the book. Lady Behnaz's ice-gray eyes gleamed in triumph as she held the book aloft. She let out a raw cackle of triumph.

"Of course it would be her," I mused. A peaceful warmth flooded over me as I said the words. "Her husband's lands border the Grove of the Willows. But where did she take the Codex?"

"Again, watch carefully."

The view shifted again. Sturdy castle walls, lower than Fitzwilliam's palace and made of brick, enclosed a wide courtyard. Lady Behnaz walked through the courtyard's garden, book clutched in her arms, and stopped in front of a room-sized stone vault. She entered, placed the text on a bookstand and then went back outside.

Lady Behnaz took an amulet in the shape of a bat in flight from her pocket. She strung it on a silver chain, placed it around her neck, and then pinched the bat amulet at the neck. A slab of white stone slid into place, sealing the vault, while a purple glow briefly illuminated the amulet and its chain.

"That vault is located inside the courtyard of Castle Behnaz," Rocky informed me. "Did you see the amulet around the Lady's neck? The chain is magic, of course. It won't come off her neck while she's alive."

"What are you saying?" I breathed.

"Do you think she will let you gain access to the Codex if you ask her politely?"

I shook my head, as much to clear it as to acknowledge what I was being told. But everything sounded correct to me. Lady Behnaz's face swam into view, screaming at me that I'd killed the man she'd loved.

“I thought not,” Rocky said, his voice dripping with regret. “If you are to save your friend, you need that book. If you want that book, you have no choice. Lady Behnaz must die tonight.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

My three companions and I picked our way along the slope of the mountain switchbacks in moody silence. The weather was pretty much the same coming down as when we were going up. Yet somehow, everything seemed colder. Darker. The winds sliced more deeply. Even Shaw was having difficulty navigating the updrafts.

We came to the pebbly banks of the three streams. I dismounted and led my horse over to where she could get a drink and rest for a moment. Shaw made a final sweep of the woods ahead and came to land nearby. The rush of water over the stones forced even the normally gruff-sounding griffin to raise his voice.

"Thy path is clear," he stated crisply. "For the remaining leagues, I have espied no traffic upon the road before us."

"The path is clear? I wish that were the case," Liam muttered, but I ignored him as Galen spoke up.

"Castle Behnaz lies due west of these streams, along the road towards the Grove of the Willows. While it commands the approaches to the Western Reaches of Fitzwilliam's realm, the lords of that realm wisely placed their headquarters close to the king's palace."

"Easier to show up at court that way, no doubt," I agreed.

"Shall we rest here, and consume the remainder of our provisions?" Galen asked, as he reached to place a hand on one of his saddlebags. "Your mount in particular could use a meal."

Part of me wanted to say 'yes', but a stronger impulse overlaid it, smothered it. "No. There's no time left. We have to be at that castle tonight."

Liam looked at me curiously. "Do we have anything resembling a plan to get this mystical text from Lady Behnaz?"

"I do."

"Then will you share it with us?"

Again, part of me wanted to, but a stronger impulse overcame it. I wasn't sure why exactly, but I followed along with that impulse.

"I'll share it when we arrive outside the castle's demesne," I said curtly. "Not before."

I fetched my horse, and all four of us trotted down the forest lane. Shaw kept pace beside us as best he could, though he started to lag to the rear whenever we hit a rise or a patch of rough ground. As Shaw began to fall further and further behind, Galen began shooting me odd glances. I didn't rein up, but I did finally speak my mind.

"What is your problem?" I snapped.

"I humbly beg your pardon," the Wizard said after a moment. "I thought you would recall that a mature griffin cannot hold the ground speed of an equine mount, a centaur, or fayleene."

"The sky's still up there. If his legs are tired, he can fly for all I care."

"Quite true. But the griffin has divined enough of your intention so that he fears that he will be spotted at a distance if he remains aloft. He is expending his energy by running on the ground in order to give us the element of surprise."

"Fine, fine. But we're not talking about him. I asked what *your* problem was."

"Our problem," Liam said, as he put on some speed to talk with us, "is that you need to call a halt so that Grimshaw can catch his breath."

"But…I need us to get to that damn castle tonight," I said peevishly.

"If we keep this pace, we'll arrive without our griffin. Or he'll be senseless from fatigue. You saw how well we fared without him against our foes."

I didn't like it, but I called a halt for a few minutes. We pulled up, and I slid out of my saddle, pacing restlessly until Shaw limped in to join us. I managed to keep my mouth shut, even though I was burning with impatience. Galen administered both water and a restorative spell to the griffin. Then it was off on the forest road again.

We didn't halt again until I caught sight of the castle's façade glinting through the dense forest cover. The setting sun turned the rough-sided bricks that made up the castle wall a bright shade of

burnt orange. I dismounted and led us forward until we came out into a small clearing just within bowshot of the walls. Shaw looked around uneasily, as did Galen. Liam, perhaps because he was smaller, didn't share the same unease. Instead, he scowled at me, waiting for me to explain myself.

"All right," I began, "I know that I've kept quiet about what needs to be done to get this Codex. That's because I needed all of you here, ready to move on what I tell you."

Shaw still looked winded, but he thumped his paw on the ground in emphasis. "Thou hast but to command us."

"That's what I like to hear. The fact is, we have no choice ahead of us but one. Lady Behnaz must die tonight if we are to retrieve that book."

Shaw's beak froze, half-open, as if he'd turned to stone. Galen's hand flew to his mouth in shock. Liam said nothing but continued to watch in silence.

"Truly, there is no love lost between us and the House of Behnaz," Galen finally said, "But I hardly feel sanguine about this. We centaurs kill relatives and neighbors with relish, but humans are a bit… touchier about it."

"Thou speakest truly, Wizard," Shaw said ruefully. "Striking at the wife of a powerful lord smacks of dishonor, and I shall have no truck with it."

I looked at the two of them, shocked to my core. "Have you two turned cowardly on me? I told you, this book is in a vault. A vault that can only be opened with an amulet that Behnaz wears around her neck! An amulet which can't be removed without killing her!"

"There must be another way!" Galen protested, and Shaw let out a squawk of agreement. "As much as I dedicate myself to our cause, this talk of cold-blooded murder is needless and loathsome!"

"You ungrateful sons-of-bitches!" I fumed, "you'd each be dead or outcast, without my help! I've given you the only family you've ever known, and you turn your back on me right when I need you most?"

Liam chose that moment to clear his throat and speak. His words were flat, calm, and they struck me like a physical blow.

“It is funny that you should say that, Dayna.” He turned to look at me face-on. “For those are my words. You were the one who gave me a family. This family. And this crime you propose is for my benefit. Should I not have a say in it?”

“Of…of course,” I stammered.

“What if I tell you to call it off? That this is not a price I am willing to pay?”

“You’d betray your own people, like Wyeth?” My hands were clenched into fists now. “Then if none of you will help me, I’ll go and kill Lady Behnaz myself!”

“As I thought.” Liam nodded to himself. “Very well. I shall follow your commands.”

“Damn straight you will. About time one of you magical creatures showed a lick of sense.”

“On one condition. That you touch my antlers first.”

I frowned. “Why? Another needless delay!”

“It is my price for my service.” The fayleene stepped in front of me, barring my way towards the castle. “Pay it, and we can be on our way.”

Galen blinked, nodding suddenly in understanding. “Yes, Dayna. Do it, and I’ll follow you as well.”

“Thou hast taken leave of thy senses!” Shaw sputtered, but Galen held a palm up towards the griffin. *Wait*, the gesture said.

Annoyed, I touched a finger one of Liam’s antlers.

The bony nub lit up with a sapphire spark. I staggered backwards until Galen caught me around the shoulders in one muscular arm. Sound of breaking glass in my head. All the feelings of impatience and annoyance and confusion vanished like mist in the morning sun.

“Oh. My. God.” I brought my hands to the sides of my face, as if to check that nothing had been permanently broken. “What the hell have I been saying? How could I…”

My brain flew through all the problems with what I’d had in mind. Snapshot quick, making connections like a piece of equipment that had been newly machined and de-greased. Killing Lady Behnaz wasn’t only morally questionable. According to Fitzwilliam, Lady

Behnaz's family was the real power in the Western Reach. Killing her would plunge the region into lawlessness, maybe even civil war. And Fitzwilliam would likely ban me from ever returning to this world. Returning to my friends.

"As I thought," Liam said, with no small amount of satisfaction. "You've been under a kind of geis, or 'spell of obligation'. Luckily, the touch of a fayleene can neutralize many kinds of magic."

Liam's power made sense. I'd seen him deflect a magical firebolt cast by the wizard Magnus Killsheven. And I knew what a geis was. Galen had cast one on me, to ensure that I'd keep the medallion that would transport me to Andeluvia. But I never thought that one could be so subtle, and so deeply implanted. My hands shook. I felt dirty, somehow violated.

"My friends," I gasped, "if it weren't for Liam…I'm so sorry for what I've been saying."

Galen smiled warmly, and Shaw nuzzled up to my side. Liam bowed before me, and it was all I could do to stop myself from letting tears flow.

"We knew," the Wizard reassured me. "Somehow, we knew. You weren't yourself since you came back from the summit."

"Yes. Since I came back from seeing the Old Man of the Mountain," I concluded frostily. "What was it that the legend said? That seeing the Old Man put one in the utmost peril?"

"Aye, that it was," Shaw growled. "Methinks that I would like to take a sledgehammer to that spirit stone. In fact–"

The griffin might have said more, but his words were cut short by the sudden whisper of bows being drawn from all around us. The ring of swords coming free of their sheaths. And above it all, the all-too-familiar voice of Lady Behnaz.

"Be still if you value your lives, brigands! Should I give the word, then the penalty of intruding upon my Lord's domain is death!"

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

I remained still, but I'd be damned if I was going to stay silent about this latest predicament.

"Lady Behnaz!" I shouted, in the general direction where I'd heard the noblewoman's voice, "It's me, Dayna Chrissie! If you have to punish anyone for intruding upon your husband's lands, take me! Let my friends go!"

There was a pause. Then the sounds of a hushed conversation among several people. A troop of bowmen emerged from the trees off to the left. To our front, a half-dozen knights dressed in chain mail and carrying shields stepped forward, swords drawn. Then they moved aside to allow Lady Behnaz through.

The woman's face looked haggard, as if she'd spent most of the day trying and failing to get some sleep. She had chosen to wear all-black attire again, though this time she had left out the shelf-step cleavage of the clothes she'd displayed to sway King Fitzwilliam. Instead, her gown featured long, bell-shaped sleeves and a midnight blue cape. Between her outfit and her cat-eyed sneer, she looked every inch like the evil queen from a medieval costume drama.

Her eyes didn't leave mine as she spoke. "Captain, have our men stand down and retire."

The knight to her left, a man with a shock of white-blonde hair, gave her a curious glance. "Are you sure? From what we heard, this… outworlder and her friends mean you ill."

"Stop filling my ears with such nonsense. Her battle-creatures refuse to dishonor themselves in assaulting me, and I'm certain that I could handle Lady Chrissie with my poison daggers, if push comes to stab."

"But milady–"

Lady Behnaz waved him off. "Allow the men to return to their dicing and drinking tonight. Keep the gate open but guarded."

The captain pressed a hand to his chest in salute, bowed, and then

turned to shout his commands. Swords went back into their scabbards and the armed men disappeared back into the woods as quickly as they had come.

Lady Behnaz spread her hands. “Well? Do you care to explain yourself?”

“I…well, it sounds like you know what I had originally come here to do.”

She regarded me for a moment. “Yes, I heard much. These lands can be wild and dangerous, so my Lord and I have magical wards placed all around our castle. But what I heard made little if any sense.”

“Milady strikes in the gold on that,” Liam agreed quietly.

“You are the last person I’d expect to send me a Year’s End tithing gift, true. Yet if you really wished me dead, you have had ample opportunity before. And it appears that your fayleene correctly deduced that you were acting under magical compulsion.”

A sigh escaped my lips. “You’re right on all counts. I wish you no harm, Lady Behnaz. We’ve been pushing as hard as we can to find the person responsible for Captain Vazura’s death.”

Behnaz’s eyes flashed at that news. “Quickly, then. Tell me what you know.”

“Vazura was killed by the same person – the same being, that is – who murdered Quinval, the former Fayleene Protector of the Forest.”

“Which is why you mentioned earlier than Prince Liam here is slated to become the next Protector.”

“Exactly. The method of killing was highly specific, and exactly the same. As is the motive: to prevent us from finding a way to stop the dragon Sirrahon from invading the Fayleene Woods.”

A frown creased Behnaz’s pale forehead. “Allowing Sirrahon to invade would grievously wound the fayleene realm. But who has conspired to declare war upon the fayleene, and why? They are a people who know many surprising things, yet they are peaceful enough.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “None of us do. But if I had to guess, the ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ is part of this conspiracy.”

Behnaz raised an eyebrow in surprise. “The soothsayers claim that spirit is a very dark one to consult.”

“For once, I’m in agreement. ‘Rocky’, as I called him, told me of a book that would have the information to defeat Sirrahon. He said that you’d found the book in the Grove of the Willows, not far from here.” And as I told Behnaz about the memory, part of me felt embarrassed at how easily I’d been led astray. The ‘Old Man’ had even played up my dislike of Behnaz by showing her unearthing the book, holding it aloft, and cackling over her find like a witch from a bad fairy tale adaptation.

“That much is true. I keep the text in an enchanted vault just inside the courtyard. I gather that it was this ‘Rocky’ that put a geis on you?”

I nodded shamefully. “He claimed that the only way to get hold of the book was to…kill you this very night, or we’d never get the amulet to open that vault.”

“You must mean this one,” she said offhandedly, and she easily pulled the silver chain with the bat-shaped amulet over her head.

She tossed it to me. Startled, I bobbled the catch and almost dropped the damned thing. The bat figurine lay in my hand, the silver chain cold against the skin of my palm.

It was my turn to frown. “I don’t understand.”

“Come along, all of you.” Behnaz said, with a sweep of one bell-shaped sleeve. I followed, dumbstruck, while my companions trailed behind. “Let’s get you this book so that you can be on your way.”

“But…why are you helping us? Me, in particular.”

“Because my husband, Lord Behnaz, is away on court business, and there is no one else who can assist you.”

“No,” I insisted, “that’s not what I meant. And you know it.”

It was a long, long moment before Behnaz answered me. “Given enough time, even I can see the truths in front of me. I was consumed by grief when Vazura died in my arms…and I blamed you for that. But last night, a thought grew in my mind and refused to leave.”

Lady Behnaz paused as we followed her through a wide arched gate into her castle’s courtyard proper. A pair of guards saluted her,

though they eyed us with suspicion as we went on by. Inside the walls, the castle grounds were surprisingly comfortable. Fountains burbled on either side of the main path, and beds of evening primrose perfumed the air as they opened in the rapidly dimming light.

"The thought was a simple realization," Behnaz continued. "That even with my dislike of you, even with Vazura's disdain, even with my husband's active opposition…you never wavered in your duty, not once. You persevered and brought Good King Benedict's killer to justice."

"I…I thank you, Lady," I stammered. "I was only doing my job."

"You might want to save your thanks. Know this: I cannot ever support you in public, for that would be to disobey my Lord and husband. But in private, I shall help you in any way I can. So long as you bring my love's murderer to justice as you did Benedict's. Whether that justice means the palace dungeon or the end of a noose, I care not."

"That, I can promise you. But I have a question for you in turn."

We arrived in front of the blocky stone vault I'd first seen as part of Rocky's vision. Behnaz reached down and picked up a glass sphere the size of a baseball. Instead of leather stitches, the sphere was banded in silver and bronze. She spoke a word, and warm yellow light like that from a gas lantern flickered into existence inside the little ball.

"A weirlight globe," Galen observed. "Truly, a somewhat expensive bauble to keep out in the garden, where anyone could potentially make off with it."

Behnaz shrugged. "My Lord is notoriously unkind to thieves." She turned her attention back to me. "So what is your question?"

"The chain of events that led us here began back at Fitzwilliam's palace," I said, carefully watching the woman's reaction. "In the rose garden. Where you transport yourself elsewhere to speak with Prince Wyeth of the Fayleene."

Her eyes widened for the briefest of moments as she tried to conceal her surprise. "Yes. House Behnaz has long had contacts with members of the fayleene. Ever since I was a little girl, I would talk

with the princeling at the edge of the Sacred Grove. He keeps me informed of many things outside the human kingdoms, while I've shared with him a great many of the things inside of them."

"Including my past history." I didn't phrase that as a question.

"Even so." She rubbed the weirlight globe absently with one finger. "But something's happened. I spoke with Wyeth early this morning. He's different now."

Liam stepped up to speak. The weirlight played across his fawnlike spots, making them dance in the flickering light. "How so, Lady Behnaz?"

"He's gone strange. Wild behind the eyes."

"Would you be surprised if you knew that he has plans to usurp me as the Protector?"

Lady Behnaz thought for a moment. She shook her head in the negative. "I thought I knew him. All those years ago, he was a very confident, happy fayleene. No longer."

"His madness may go further than you think," I added. "Wyeth is desperate for power. I don't know if it was his free will or a geis, but when we came upon him in the Fayleene Woods, he was in conference with the same demon who killed Vazura."

Lady Behnaz's face had looked sad, drawn. Now it set like white granite. "Then if I see Wyeth again, I will have him caged for you. He will answer for his crimes."

"If thou canst leave enough of him to be tried, surely," Shaw grumbled. "I dare not say if I could show similar restraint."

"I too shall be sorely tested," Behnaz acknowledged. "Dayna, pinch the head of the amulet between your fingers."

I did so, and a dim purple light glowed from the bat figurine for a moment. The stone slab that made up the door of the vault slid open with the grinding noise. Behnaz held up the weirlight and reached inside. She let out a grunt as she lifted a rectangular object one-handed and placed it in my arms.

Heavy, was my first thought as I beheld the soft green cover of the *Codex of the Bellum Draconus*. The cover had no title. But I got gooseflesh up my arms as I realized that the hard surface of the cover

had a scaly texture like freshly harvested snakeskin.

"This appears to be quite a tome," Galen observed, and his fingers twitched with excitement, eager to touch the book himself. "And I can sense that this book is infused with magical energy."

"I sense that as well," Liam said. "It's almost smells *warm*."

"Then with luck, there may be a table of contents indicating where the information related to Sirrahon may be found."

"Here's hoping," I agreed, and I opened the cover.

I expected the dusty, faintly wholesome smell that came along with old hardcover books that had been tucked away in the back shelf of a library. Instead, I scented an odd mixture of spicy herbs, like cardamom or star anise. The opening pages were jammed with text. The words and letters leapt off the pages in a riot of colors.

My breath began to come short as I continued flipping through the Codex. Each heavy page made an audible *thump* as I turned it. There were some abstract pictures among the strange, twisting jumble of text that ran on for page after page. But the text itself…I looked helplessly to the Wizard after a moment.

"Galen," I whispered, "please tell me that you can read this."

He shook his head. That brooding, noble face of his looked anguished.

"If perchance your next question is: do I have a spell to translate the Codex?" he said sadly, "then I'm afraid that you will not enjoy my answer."

The weirlight flickered as the evening turned to night around us.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

It got so quiet inside the garden-like environs of the castle courtyard that the chirps of crickets began their nightly serenade. Shaw sat off to one side, wings furled, looking dejected and frustrated that his mighty strength was of no use here. Lady Behnaz stood next to him, looking much the same. Galen continued to peer at the open pages as if he could force the book itself to speak against its will.

Liam broke the silence with the firm tap of a forehoof on the stone pathway.

"I cannot accept this defeat!" he declared. "Wizard, do you have the magical resources yet to bring us back to Fitzwilliam's palace?"

Galen shook his head. "Alas, no."

"Then I'll travel there myself. With the book."

"To what end?"

"I'll consult with the city's archivists! Whoever I need to talk to in order to find someone who can understand the texts in that damned Codex!"

"Princeling, I understand your concern," Galen said tiredly. "But I've been the head of the Archivist's Guild since I arrived in Benedict's service. I'd studied with every scholar there, and no one has seen anything like these letters."

Liam made a motion with his antlers as if he longed to skewer something. "Understand my concern? How could you? You've never had the responsibility for an entire people, a people staring disaster in the face–"

"You overreach yourself," Galen snapped back at the fayleene. "I too have commanded my people, and on the cusp of battle against an army under Magnus Killsheven!"

"Enough!" I said, and I stepped between the two. "We're all tired and frustrated. I've said some things tonight that I'm damned ashamed of. Trust me, you two don't want to join that club."

Liam looked mortified as he heard my words, and Galen quickly

rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. The wizard crossed his arms and bowed to the fayleene.

"Perchance I spoke rashly, Heir to the Protector. Forgive my words."

Liam returned the bow. "I do, and I beg you to forgive me as well."

"Ah, 'tis a pity," Shaw mused. "I was deciding which of you to bet on in the upcoming clash of arms."

"Hush now," I said gently, as I gave the griffin a pat on the head. "We have enough trouble on our plate without asking for another serving."

Truth be told, I was amazed that the argument had gotten as far as it had. Compared to Shaw, both Liam and Galen were supremely level-headed. It was probably that even-temperedness that had allowed Liam to be able to deal with other species, while Galen had overcome the notorious temper of his kind to become a wizard, and a member of the Archivist's Guild to boot.

I let out a tiny gasp as the word *guild* flashed through my brain, lit up in neon.

Who had used that word to describe something before?

Galen had. So had someone else. Someone who I never thought in a million years could be useful. And yet, with that weird 'clicking' thing my mind did when the switchboard was working, I realized that they could be the key to all of this.

"Wait a moment," I breathed, "Rocky specifically stated that the Codex was *two* things: a recounting of the last Great War of Andeluvia…and a prophecy."

A snort from Shaw. "By the bones of my elders! There is always a prophecy tied into these pronouncements, and ne'er have I seen one worth more than my shed pinion feathers."

"That may be," I agreed, "but that's not the point."

Galen's brow furrowed. "Perhaps my head is a stuffed bag of sand tonight. What, indeed, is the point?"

"That we know of one person who specializes in the subject of prophecy." I turned hurriedly to Lady Behnaz. "I'm afraid that I have

to ask a favor of you."

"Whatever you wish," she replied.

"We're all tired," I said. "But we need to get back to Fitzwilliam's palace as soon as possible. I've already pushed the mount I was given to her limits. So, do you have a fresh horse I can borrow?"

* * *

From Castle Behnaz to the capital city's gates was a hard two-hour ride. It helped that the road there was wide, straight, and even lit by torchlight in a few spots. Compared to the other byways I'd used in Andeluvia, this route was obviously well traveled. Prosperous looking inns clustered at the edges of the small towns we passed. The sound of music and the scent of freshly cooked food beckoned, but we ignored these temptations and pushed on.

We reached the city gates just as the moon crested above the horizon. The night watchmen raised nary an eyebrow as I galloped up on horseback, but they gaped in amazement as I was followed by a centaur, a fayleene, and a griffin.

The light from the newly risen moon reflected on a stone basin of water, just within the gates. Wooden buckets, obviously laid out for public use, sat in a neat stack to one side. So I reined in my mount and called a halt. Shaw wheezed and gasped his way over to the still pool. He scattered a flock of night doves as he plunged his beak into the cool liquid and then lifted his head to drink his fill.

I waited patiently while the griffin drank. Liam went over to join him, delicately sipping where Shaw gulped away with abandon. The few people out on the street stopped to stare, but I ignored them. Apparently, I was getting used to the notoriety generated by my companions.

"Galen," I asked, "if you were with the Archivists, then you must know: how far back do the histories of this kingdom reach?"

"The earliest texts date to the founding of this kingdom," the centaur replied. "Back to the ascension of King Julian the Young in the human kingdom and Angrod I of the centaurs. Seven centuries ago, give or take a decade."

I thought on that for a moment. "But Rocky said that the humans

and centaurs hadn't founded their kingdoms yet. That they were 'scratching out a living' on the plains to the south."

"Then this was an exceedingly long time ago." Galen scratched his chin in thought as Liam and Shaw rejoined us. I led the way through the city streets, choosing to follow wider and wider avenues until we approached what had to be the main pedestrian crossroad before the palace proper. The Wizard looked puzzled as he said, "This is not the normal way for us to enter, especially if one is on horseback."

"I'm betting that my quarry won't be at the palace," I informed him, as I looked as best I could over the people passing by.

The scene was subdued at this time of night, but torchlight illuminated both the palace gates and the thoroughfare's corner shops. The clink of a blacksmith's hammer came from one, while the savory smell of meat pies came from another. Groups of well-dressed ladies in the company of young noblemen passed by the gate. Just as I thought. This was where the relatively well-heeled would be taking their evening strolls. And that meant maximum exposure for anyone who wanted to be annoying in public.

An old man's screeching cry echoed off the very stones of the courtyard around us.

"Heed me, blasphemers! Heed the words of the soothsayers, 'ere you perish!"

"And there's the man I'm looking for," I said, with some satisfaction. "Come on."

Galen let out a groan. "Alas, I should have guessed."

The bulk and raw power of the griffin and the centaur allowed us to cut through the milling groups of people with ease. Even so, I dismounted and led my horse as we made our way over to the side of the palace gate. A slat-thin man with a wizened, age-spotted face continued to harangue the passersby. He strode back and forth, gesturing wildly with his long wooden staff to punctuate the words he spoke.

"Death!" he cried. "Foul, gruesome death awaits those who do not heed the words of doom! Awaits those who ignore my words at their peril! For their very soul shall burn in the pits of–"

“Greetings, Master Seer Zenos,” I called out.

“Do my eyes deceive me? No, it is indeed Dayna Chrissie!” Zenos said, as he dropped the whole ‘Book of Revelations’ ranting as easily as I’d have kicked off a set of slippers. “It is kind of you and your friends to visit me at work.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, trying and failing to suppress a grin. The man’s halo of thin white hair still gave him a slightly comic look. It wasn’t helped by his choice of tunic, a fuzzy blue thing that looked as if it were made from cheap terrycloth.

Zenos and I hadn’t exactly started off on the right foot. As a matter of fact, it had been hate at first sight. Zenos had felt that summoning me threatened the work of the soothsayers. But since then, I’d acknowledged the man’s insights as correct (rare and usually late though they were), so he’d warmed up to me a great deal.

“What can I do for you this fine evening?” he asked.

“As it happens, I need your help…reading a certain prophesy.”

The man’s face brightened. “Splendid! Do you have a copy?”

I looked to Galen. He remained nonplussed when it came to the soothsayer, probably due to the years that he’d spent enduring Zenos’ rantings at court. But the centaur passed up on the opportunity to comment and instead just pulled the Codex out of one saddlebag.

“By the light of the golden sickle!” Zenos exclaimed, as he took the text, “this is a rare book indeed! How did you ever come by it?”

“It’s a long story. But can you read it?”

A hush fell over our little party as Zenos flipped through the pages. He traced the edges of several of the letters, mumbled to himself, and then finally returned to the inside cover, where a quartet of squiggly symbols were mashed together in a diamond formation.

“This is what my brothers and I call *Rohonic* text,” he stated plainly. “I can read it, after a fashion.”

Liam let out an exhalation of pent-up breath, but I wasn’t relaxing yet. “What do you mean, ‘after a fashion?”

“Old Rohonic is at best halfway understood. It’s part letter, part pictogram, and two-thirds metaphor.” Zenos pointed at the symbols on the open page, and I had to squint to make them out in the

ambient torchlight. “See here? Together, these four symbols make up the sinuous outline of a single dragon.”

Sure enough, if you squinted at the symbols in a certain way, you could make out what Zenos was referring to. But what got my attention were the soothsayer’s next words.

“As to the words themselves, they make up a phrase that could mean ‘The Gossip of the Pretty Dragon’, or ‘The Secrets of the Deadly Dragon’. It all depends on context.”

“Yeah,” I said dryly, “I’m pretty sure it’s the latter.”

“Well, if you trust my skills with the translation, perhaps you could entrust your text to me for a couple of days?”

“Master Seer,” Liam began, as he stepped up to bow before the soothsayer, “This text is vital to my people’s well-being, and time is of the essence. Can you try to work your translation this very night? The fayleene would be grateful.”

Zenos blinked. “This dusty old text…is suddenly of great and important need?”

“It is,” I acknowledged. “And Liam here is the next in line for the Protectorship of the Fayleene. His gratitude could come in handy for your guild.”

The old man clapped the book shut and made a yellow-toothed smile. “Very well, then! My pronouncements of doom shall have to bide for a while, then. You all look as tired as I shall be, by the end of this night. And you need this information as soon as is humanly possible. So I shall extend my invitation to you all.”

“Invitation? To what?”

“Why, to stay overnight, of course!” Zenos tucked the Codex under one arm and used his staff as a walking stick. “We have plenty of room at the soothsayer’s guild for all of you. And of course you’re going to accept my offer. I have foreseen it!”

Galen shook his head ruefully at that, and Shaw let out a throaty chuckle. Frankly, so long as the soothsayers didn’t sleep on beds of nails, I was game.

“All right,” I agreed, “we are your guests for tonight.”

“Aha!” Zenos cried in triumph, as we followed his fast, limping

walk down one of the side streets. “What did I tell you? I am never wrong. Never!”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

The soothsayer's guild turned out to be a mushroom-shaped collection of tan and white wood buildings, some of which were irregularly stacked on top of one another. Instead of thatch or wood, the slanted roofs were tiled in gray slate. Porthole-style windows with red or blue glass added a touch of color to the mix. Though, taken as a whole, the entire structure looked like a pile of dirty dishes sitting in someone's sink.

The doors were tall, but not especially wide. Galen paused to knock the dirt from his hooves before he entered, and then only had to duck slightly as he entered. Shaw on the other hand had to hold his breath on an inhale before squeezing his bulk through, even with his wings folded.

"Thou hast best reconsider thy thoughts, fayleene," he grumbled, as Liam watched with amusement, evidently contemplating a comment.

Inside, the atmosphere was a heady mix of charcoal, fragrant herbs, and pipe tobacco. A large table dominated the guild's main hall. At one end, a pair of servers were scrubbing away the remnants of a rather messy dinner. Perched on the other was a pile of pseudo-scientific equipment and astrological charts. Long couches stacked high with tasseled pillows took up an entire wall. A fire burned away merrily in the hearth, heating an iron pot that hung on a big black hook over the flames.

"Akelda! Aki, we have guests!" Zenos called. He peered around impatiently as he added, "Where is that damned acolyte of mine?"

A stout, middle-aged woman dressed in a hooded cloak appeared from one of the many doorways. A dark widow's peak of hair jutted from under her hood. "I am here, Master Seer. I've been busy settling accounts with that Vatalbsky woman. The one claiming compensation for the theft of her crystal ball."

"Blast and damn that woman, pay her and move on." Zenos

leaned over and added in a whisper, “Anyone with a crystal ball should have seen that theft coming a furlong away, but so long as the member pays their dues, we’re honor-bound to help out.”

“I can understand,” I replied. This was news to me – that the soothsayers operated a sort of insurance policy for their members. For some reason, I’d always thought of doomsayers like Zenos operating as free agents.

“Aki, we have Lady Chrissie joining us,” Zenos stated, with a rap of his staff on the wooden floor. “Also, a fine wizard centaur, a griffin from the royal guard, and a fayleene prince. Kindly set out food, drink and prepare some sleeping arrangements.”

Akelda blanched a little under her hood. “But sir…all we have is *frumentum* on the fire this evening. And since we are hosting the Convention of the Eastern Scryers, our sleeping cells are all spoken for!”

I wasn’t sure what the food was, but it did smell good. Galen nodded at me encouragingly and I said, “We’re not fussy eaters. And given how tired we are, bedding isn’t too much of an issue, either.”

“Then I shall turn you over to Aki for the nonce,” Zenos pronounced, “while I begin work on your Codex of ‘The Pretty Dragon’.”

The fare at the Soothsayer’s Guild turned out to be a good deal better than I would have expected. Somewhere, a bowl of garden greens and turnip tops was found for Liam. ‘Frumentum’ turned out to be something an awful lot like the canned beef stew my family ate while on camping trips. A rich, meaty gravy covered veritable slabs of white turnips and carrots. The gravy itself had been thickened with cracked kernels of wheat. I gobbled down an entire bowlful, along with a chunk of fresh-baked bread and a goblet of summer crush. Galen polished off two bowls.

As for Shaw, Aki simply set aside the rest of the wide-mouthed pot and allowed the griffin to dive in beak-first. If Grimshaw was at all concerned about burns, he didn’t let it inconvenience him as he stuck his head into the hot metal container. In fact, the sounds of his gulping and chewing were echoed inside the pot, drawing plenty of

curious stares from the guild's other guests.

"Thou needest sleep," Shaw announced, after letting out a lion-sized belch. "I shall take first watch and let the Wizard and fayleene replenish themselves."

"I think we all need sleep, big guy," I noted. The hearth fire had begun to burn low by the time we'd finished off the guild's repast. And after being keyed up all day, the warmth of the room and the full tummy from the late dinner were starting to tug my eyelids towards the 'down' position.

Akelda approached and gave a little bow. "I am familiar with griffin custom," she said politely. "Inside the guild, an acolyte stands watch during the night hours. Also, we have protective magic wards guarding our guest hall. You may all sleep knowing that your safety and honor is assured."

"See, Shaw? So we don't need to–"

The griffin had already curled up on the floor like a big cat and begun to snore.

Both fayleene and centaur had selected a variety of cushions to recline on.

Liam simply nodded at me tiredly as he neatly folded his legs under his body. "This is the first night since my 'ascension' that I'm going to sleep in a hopeful mood."

"Me, too." I reached out and touched his antler again, for luck. I took a closer look in the flickering firelight as he closed his eyes. His antlers had just about evened out in their growth.

Galen followed Liam's lead in folding up his legs, though as he closed his eyes, he turned his arms so that they rested palms-up, index finger and thumbs curled together. If it weren't for his equine lower half, the Wizard would have passed for any one of Los Angeles' thousands of yoga practitioners as they went into a meditation pose.

I commandeered one of the couches that sat against the wall and piled up a couple of the remaining pillows to put my head on. The fabric smelled like it had sat too close to a campfire, but it was soft, and I was beyond being fussy. Sleep came as quickly as if I'd flicked off the switch on a light bulb back home.

That wasn't to say that my brain switched off, though.

In my mind, it was winter again.

The blood trail stood out against the snow. Scarlet splatters led away into the woods, outlining the drunken stagger of a gut-shot fayleene doe. A bright gash marred the papery-thin bark of a sugar maple tree. The trail swung back towards my family's house.

I knew what was to come, but even so, I dreaded it.

The rambling cords of Christmas lights on the porch lit up the yard, looking less festive than ever. Casting a sickly red-green glow against the snow. I walked on by them, past the rust-spotted hulk of the family station wagon and up to the peeling garage door.

Smell of old latex paint and blood in my nose, taste of it in my mouth.

I pushed the door open.

The all-weather bulb inside the garage shone on Daddy's blood-slicked hunting vest. His keening wail as he knelt over the coffin-shaped freezer still chilled my blood. He gathered up the limp body of the fayleene and held it towards me.

His voice was an accusing shout. "This is your fault, Dayna! Yours, Dayna! *Yours!*"

"Dayna," a more reasonable voice said, as it overrode my father's, "Dayna, it is first light. You must get up, for destiny does not wait for laggards."

I opened my eyes. The fire had gone out in the hearth, but a gray morning light filtered in through windows beyond the table and a pair of tiny round skylights set high in the roof overhead. Master Seer Zenos stood by the couch I'd commandeered as my bed, offering me a hand up. I let out a small groan as I took it; it was early, I was still groggy, and the closest cup of coffee was an entire world away.

Galen still reclined on his cushions, eyes closed. Shaw had rolled onto his back, snoring loudly, his limbs curled up in such a way that he looked like griffin roadkill. Liam waited quietly at the far end of the table, sipping at a bowl of water. I shook my head as I joined the fayleene and Zenos at the far end of the table. Zenos pushed a cup of warm liquid into my hands as he sat back in his seat.

“I shall wake your other companions shortly,” he began. “But I wanted to speak first with you two about what I’ve learned.”

“Why?” I asked, after I’d downed a couple slurps from the cup. It tasted just like someone had crumbled green tea leaves and a handful of peat moss into some warm water, but it was surprisingly fortifying. “I don’t withhold information from any of my friends. What I know, they know.”

Liam nodded agreement. Zenos rubbed his tired eyes with a pair of bony fingers. “Maybe I am being too cautious, then. Listen to what I’ve learned, and you can make your own decision.”

“That sounds fair to me,” Liam said. I sat back, holding the warm cup in my hand for reassurance.

“This Codex is a recounting of an event called ‘the Great War’. A war that took place almost three thousand years ago.”

“Between who?” I asked. “That’s two whole eons and change older than this kingdom.”

“I only have part of the answer,” Zenos said heavily, “which is why I wanted to speak with both of you about this in private.”

“We’re all ears.”

The soothsayer opened the book to a page he’d bookmarked with a colorful bird’s feather. He scanned the strange words for a moment, as if to refresh his memory before he spoke.

“In the last battle of that war, the side which wrote the book, the so-called ‘Creatures of Light’ faced off against the ‘Creatures of the Dark’ on the other.

“There are several symbols that represent the battle line for both sides. In the time you’ve given me, I’ve only been able to decipher a couple. The most obvious, anyway. For examples, on the side of the Light. See here? The sigil here is commonly understood to mean ‘magic’. The one below is the symbol for ‘stag’. This must refer to the deer of fey magic, or the fayleene.”

The feeling of tumblers turning on a safe flashed through my mind as Zenos went on.

“I am less sure about my second translation, but I am willing to make an informed guess. The next pair of sigils below mean ‘lion’ and

‘eagle’. The most obvious interpretation is that this represents the griffins.”

Which is why the griffin elders knew about Sirrahon, I realized. *But why send Shaw on such a roundabout journey to get this information? Why forbid him to say who he spoke to? Did these elders know about the histories? About the Codex itself?*

“What about the side that lost? These ‘Creatures of the Dark’?”

“Again, I can only understand a few symbols. The sinuous, snake-like sigil means ‘dragon’. And next to it, a quadruple sign of air, fire, magic, and ‘spirit’, or ‘soul’. Today, the wizards use that same design in their runes to signify ‘demons’.”

“So the plot thickens,” I said, half to myself. “There’s no mention of humans? Centaurs? Other creatures of any kind?”

Zenos gave me a helpless look. “I’ve not been able to identify the remaining species via their symbols. It may be impossible, for this language relies so heavily on metaphor and hidden meaning. If I do not know the images behind the metaphors, then it is unlikely we will ever know who was involved.”

“Or on which side they fought,” Liam said darkly.

“Now you appreciate why I woke you first,” Zenos agreed quietly.

Even with the warm tea-and-peat water in my stomach, I felt a chill.

“Here is the remainder I’ve been able to translate about those last days,” Zenos said, and he opened a second, smaller book to sit next to the Codex. His gaze switched back and forth between the two books as he read slowly, cautiously, like a man treading on thin ice. “And so the forces of the Creatures of Light…triumphed. They could not… destroy many of the ones. I think, ‘Dark Ones’. They turned them back with their name-sigils. Sigils inscribed as if they were…sacred ‘seals of power’. Or ‘banners of power’, I’m not sure.”

Liam perked up. “Is Sirrahon’s name-sigil listed?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.” A quick *thump-thump-thump* of pages being flipped, and the blood-red mark of a crouching dragon looked out from the mid-section of the book. It wasn’t exactly an endearing design. Zenos turned one more page and continued to read. “The

leaders of the Creatures of Light placed as many of the Dark Ones as they could into…the earth. Put them under…rock in order to sleep under the heath. That may be 'hills', it is hard to tell. They sealed others inside the great stones that lay athwart the mountains."

"Spirit stones," I muttered. "It has to be."

The sound of a clanging gong shattered the quiet of the morning. Shaw flipped over, awake in an instant. Galen shook his head, groggy from sleep, and began to get to his feet.

"What is it?" I cried.

Zenos slammed the two books on his desk closed, and then shouted over the din. "Something has set off the magical wards that protect the Guild!" He gathered up the texts and pushed towards the front door with them still tucked under one arm. I followed behind, just in time to see the old man raise his staff as he reached the outside. "Get back, dark power!"

Destry neighed, rearing up in answer. The dawn light illuminated his dark equine body like a particularly lively marble statue. The pooka's eyes flashed golden yellow and his hooves churned the air.

"Wait!" I cried, "Don't hurt him, Zenos! This creature is a friend!"

"A pooka?" Zenos blinked and took a wary step back. Galen joined us in a clatter of hooves. Shaw squeezed through the door and brought up the rear. "I must admit…never have I heard of a pooka doing anything but delivering bad dreams or bringing terrible news."

"He's okay once you get to know him," I said reassuringly. "What's going on, Destry?"

"I've been looking for you all over Andeluvia, *chére*!" Destry exclaimed, in an out-of-breath voice. "Sirrahon has come upon the fayleene! The dragon, he is turning their sacred forest into a charnel house!"

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Chapter Thirty

My heart sank. No, it would be better to say that it *plummeted*.

We'd run out of time. And Sirrahon was upon us. Galen's handsome face was pale with shock. Shaw's looked eager. Liam's had a grim aspect I'd never seen before.

"We have to go, now!" Liam demanded.

"It will take you hours to reach the Fayleene Woods on horseback," Zenos pointed out. "At least a couple by griffin flight, as well."

"I'm aware of that," I said. I dug into the folds of my jacket, took out my gun and removed the spent magazine. "Galen, do you have enough magic built up now to get us there?"

He shot me a troubled look. "Yes…though I must warn you, I won't have enough magic to bring us all back should we run into trouble."

"I would rather die," Liam said firmly, "than fail to protect my people."

"Thou need not worry about thy griffin," Shaw declared. "Wouldst I rather die 'ere I miss another chance to prove mine own mettle!"

I fished out my spare magazine. "Well, I'd prefer *not* to die if possible. But we've got no choice."

"Then I shall notify the king and his palace guard," Zenos said. He hefted the two books under his arm. "And you'll need these."

I took the Codex and the smaller book that Zenos had been using to help with the translation work and turned to Galen. The Wizard nodded, grabbed the volumes in one beefy hand, and stuffed them into one of his saddlebags. I slapped home the fully loaded magazine into my weapon and steadied my breath. That was about all the preparation we were going to get.

"Let's do this," I said, trying my best to keep the shakiness out of my voice.

Galen's voice rose and fell as he recited the words to his spell, and

the world vanished in a white flash and the old-bleach smell of ozone. I'd braced myself better this time; the stomach-turning lurch didn't knock me to my knees, at least.

The world swam into focus. I swayed on my feet for a moment. Retained my balance. But any pleasure I felt in my accomplishment was doused as soon as the smell hit my nose.

During transport, the ozone smell was terrible, but at least it was temporary. Fresh air wasn't more than a second or two away.

Not this time.

Searing, hot wind blew ash into my face. Shaw let out a squawk of surprise and dismay. Ozone had been replaced with the thick, sooty smell of burning peppermint. Glowing embers rained down around us like some hellish kind of snowflake.

We stood in the smoldering remains of the Sacred Grove. The great trees that had cast their branches overhead to form the cathedral-like roof had been smashed, branches turned to so much kindling. Bare trunks stood like pillars in an ancient, ruined temple. And lying half-buried amidst the debris that choked the clearing were the remains of Quinval's charred body. Two other fayleene, senior does by the looks of them, also sprawled nearby. A charnel reek emanated from their half-burned corpses. Flames still danced among the smaller trees and underbrush off to the left. On the right, pops and hisses rose from the ash-choked waters of a little stream.

"By all that is sacred," Galen whispered, as he took in the ruined, burning surroundings.

If the devastation shook Liam, he didn't show it. Instead, he took a few steps forward, ears perked and focused ahead of us.

"Over here!" he called. "All fayleene, to me!"

A rising crescendo of crackles came from the underbrush to the left. Dozens of fayleene, most covered in soot and a couple sporting minor burns, emerged and began to join us in the clearing. A not-so-distant *thud* shook the ground, a horrible giant-sized footstep followed by an indescribably awful *slithering* sound.

"This is not the most desirable of situations," Galen said, as he danced back a couple of steps. That might have been the

understatement of the year, but he raised a hand, murmuring his words of power to himself. A ball of blue energy began to grow in his palm.

"Some luck still holds," Liam remarked, as one of the Lead Does ran up to us. "It seems that Orlaith still lives."

"Protector!" she brayed, as she slid to a stop before him, "We are undone! You and your friends must do what you can to stop this!"

I bit back a retort. Yes, the fayleene had some nerve to say that, after threatening to kill us the last time we'd been within their Sacred Grove. But with their world shattered and members of their species lying dead around us, it wasn't time for snappy comebacks.

"I shall," Liam said firmly. He raised his voice so that it boomed into the clearing. "All of you, listen to me! I need your presence within the wood, your fey powers, to boost my own. Elsewise we must flee and be destroyed as we do so."

One of the younger stags bleated plaintively. "What do you wish of us, Protector?"

Liam nodded towards the stream. "Shelter there. Follow the water away from the clearing so that you are under some cover, at least. I will do my best to keep the dragon away from you."

"But what good will that do if the dragon–"

"It will help keep you from burning to death when the woods catch fire, if nothing else!" Liam snapped. "You heard me! Move!"

"Shaw, Galen," I added, "come on. While the fayleene head for the stream, we need to get to the far end of the grove. Otherwise we're all one big target."

Behind us, the spotted flanks of the fayleene merged into a fawn-colored mass as they crossed the clearing and splashed into the stream. The water only reached as high as the bellies of the younger does and stags, but Liam was right about one thing: it would give his people at least a little protection from the fires that lit the woodland around them.

Shaw clambered over the masses of branches that clogged the clearing with ease. Galen had to help me over a few spots, wincing once or twice as burning embers continued to fall around us. At least I

had some layered, non-flammable clothes on, and Shaw's fur-and-feather combination gave him protection. Galen's exposed equine hindquarters had no such protection.

Liam had a similar problem. As soon as he'd sent the herd of fayleene on their way, he joined us at the far side of the clearing, trying his best to avoid the hot spots along the ground. A small burning leaf settled in the base of one antler. I swatted it away before it could hurt him. The wind shifted for a moment, shrouding us in mint-scented black smoke.

"I didn't expect our dragon friend to set the place ablaze," I coughed. "Is there anything we can do about this?"

Liam's eyes scanned the cloudy skies overhead. The iron gray of the clouds was lit by the fire into the red of a celestial forge. He nodded, as if to himself.

"There just might be. With the new powers of mine, there just might be."

The fayleene princeling's eyes glowed. They took on the same faraway look that I'd seen when Liam had 'spoken' to the various forest creatures. Shaw was the first to spot the new arrivals. He jabbed his beak in the air in excitement.

"Have my eyes gone tricksy?" he marveled. "'Tis been nigh upon thirty years since I have seen the like!"

I craned my neck and looked about until I spotted them. Two birds the size of California condors soared overhead with the effortless grace of red-tailed hawks on a spiraling thermal. Their bodies were solid black, with strange, squared-off wings and conical yellow claws.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Thunderbirds," Galen replied, with an approving grin. "Very clever. A very rare species that I didn't realize nested in these woods. They have two well-known abilities: calling down lightning is one. The other is–"

From far overhead, the twin birds let out the thin, high-pitched whistle of a tea kettle that had been left on the stove for too long. Then in unison, they brought their wings down together on a single beat. Thunder rolled across the clearing, echoing off distant

mountains.

Then the clouds overhead opened with a drenching shower of cool rain.

The shower only lasted fifteen, twenty seconds at most, but the fires around us were beaten down and drowned under the fat load of raindrops. Other sections of forest continued to burn, but the flames had to fight for purchase now on the freshly moistened wood and damp bark.

And just like that, as I thought for a split second that things were starting to look up, another thud shook the ground. A slither. Followed by another thud, one overlaid with the bending and snapping sound of trees splintering under an unimaginable weight.

We all looked skyward as a shadow rippled across our faces.

A shape loomed above the trees. A hot wind blasted my cheeks again, like someone had swung open the burn-box of a wood stove. The moist beads of rain that clung to my hair evaporated in an instant. Above the horrible whamming of my heart, I heard the pumping-bellows sound of enormous, leathery wings.

The dragon looked ash-black for a moment. But as he drew into the light I saw that his scales were the all-too-familiar color of drying blood. They glistened, but not with the sheen of a healthy snake. The creature's scales were the thickness of terra-cotta roof tile, and they gleamed like slabs of ruddy marble shot through with veins of mica.

At first glance, Sirrahon didn't quite look like one of the dragons from the heraldic tapestries in Fitzwilliam's palace. In fact, his low-slung profile and arched back resembled a supersized snapping turtle I'd once seen in the Pike County millpond. Unlike those comically inoffensive turtles, Sirrahon had neatly folded away a pair of bat-like wings along the sides of his upper back. Running down the middle was a ridge of ten-foot high spinal scales that would have sent a Jurassic-era stegosaurus slinking away in shame.

Sirrahon's four legs were mastodon-thick, with spade-shaped claws. One set of these claws closed around a medium-sized oak and gave it a twist, snapping the trunk off at ground level. Mesmerized, I followed the path of the giant claws until they placed the tree into the

dragon's mouth. With a *crunch*, it was gone.

The thought ran through my fear-addled mind: *I suppose it's too much to hope that Sirrahon's a strict vegetarian.*

The dragon's eyes were the glittering yellow-white of xenon headlamps. Below the eyes was a hooked beak of a snout, full of sharp teeth and complete with sulfurous vapor billowing out of the nostrils like a pair of active hot springs. His long neck swung skyward. Then, moving much too quickly for anything so large, Sirrahon rose up on his hind legs.

A curse from one of my friends. Gasps from another. I didn't see who had done what. It was too much to take in, until my mind could grope for some kind of yardstick to measure things against. With a shiver, I realized that Sirrahon's body alone was the size of two railroad cars stacked end to end.

The dragon's head shot out. With a *snap*, he crunched down one of Liam's summoned thunderbirds in a puff of black feathers. An earth-shattering *boom* as he brought his front feet down again. A *snort*, followed by the accelerating chuff-chuff of an oncoming diesel engine.

"Dayna!" Galen grabbed me around my waist and slung me across his back like a sack of potatoes. "We must be elsewhere!"

The centaur's hooves bit into the soft dirt as he sprang forward. I hung on with one arm, looked back over the Wizard's equine hindquarters.

Sirrahon's jaws gaped impossibly wide. I looked up, right into the very cavern of nightmares, saw almost absently that the creature's teeth ran all the way down his throat. The rumble of a volcanic explosion.

A cone of fire erupted from that horrible cavern as I held on to Galen for dear life.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Damp or not, the woods behind us leapt into flame as Sirrahon's fiery breath ignited the underbrush. Adrenaline pumping, I managed to lever myself up onto Galen's back just as the centaur swerved to one side. I gulped as I looked to the rear. The hellish red of Sirrahon's jet of fire moved to track us. High above, the creature's baleful eyes shone down at us like searchlights.

"Faster, Galen!" I cried, as the dragon flexed its neck, and the molten cone of its breath moved ever closer. "He's almost got us!"

The Wizard said nothing. He bent into his full gallop, face red with exertion. His breath came out as tight, wheezing gasps. I got ready to jump. At this speed, I'd be lucky not to land and break an ankle. But I was slowing Galen down, and I wasn't about to let him get toasted on my account.

Just as I was about to leap, I heard the dull *crump* of rock on bone. The dragon's cone of breath shut off like water from a tap. Galen skidded to a stop and I scrambled off his back. We turned to see what had happened.

Shaw circled the dragon's head, wings beating furiously. He held a stone the size of a steamer trunk in his leonine forepaws.

"Dost thou like the sting of rock, monster?" Sirrahon rubbed the top of his snout where the griffin had either lobbed or dropped a rocky payload as Shaw taunted him. "I have another taste of it here for you!"

The dragon's head bobbed at the end of his sinuous neck. He snapped at the griffin, jaws closing inches away as Shaw bobbed and weaved. The griffin shot skywards as Sirrahon made a mighty lunge. My heart caught in my throat as I heard a *crunch*.

Shaw dropped away, leaving the dragon clutching only the rock in his jaws.

"Galen!" I shouted, "Can you hit that stone with something?"

"A target that size is foal's play," he said grimly. He flung his arm

forward, releasing the ball of magical energy he'd kept spinning in his palm.

The glowing sphere sailed up along the dragon's neck, disappearing against the creature's bulk until it touched the stone. A *fizt!* as it detonated.

The rock Shaw had jammed into Sirrahon's mouth exploded. Sharp fragments rained down around us. At least some were stone. Many were jagged remnants of the dragon's teeth.

Sirrahon blinked, as if he wasn't sure what had just happened.

Then he let out a roar that shook the leaves off any nearby trees that weren't already ablaze.

Oh, great, I thought. *We just pissed him off.*

Instinctively, I ducked as the *slithering* sound came again. Galen danced back as the dragon's telephone-pole sized tail sliced the air between us. The Wizard shouted his next incantation over the din of smashed trees. The lightning bolt that shot from his fingertip glanced off the side of the dragon's head, rocking it backwards and leaving a black scorch mark.

Shaw darted in again, slashing at Sirrahon's neck with his talons and beak. The sound of chalk on a marble-hard surface echoed as the griffin's attack did little more than attract the dragon's attention for a moment. But it gave me an opening as Sirrahon turned away to snap at the retreating griffin.

My gun looked pitifully small in my hands as I assumed a shooter's stance and took careful aim at the dragon's eye. I'd tried this once before with the dragons that had attacked me and Galen in these very same woods. It was worth a try. Sirrahon's near eye was a lot further away, but the fact that it was the size of a Cadillac's hubcap made things easier.

I squeezed off a trio of shots. Two sparked against the creature's stone-tough hide and whined off harmlessly. The third hit home. I didn't see so much as a scuff mark on the clear scale that protected the eye, but the yellow iris pulsed and Sirrahon bellowed anew. Maybe I hadn't done more than give it a good poke, but again, it was enough to get its attention.

Too much attention. My guts turned to jelly as the diesel throb of Sirrahon's fire breath got going again.

Destry phased into existence off to my right. He reared, neighing wildly, silhouetting his black form against a cluster of burning trees. Sirrahon cut loose, smothering the pooka in dragon fire. Destry may have been an ethereal, but I held my breath until Sirrahon let up. The mystical horse appeared, unharmed and phased into insubstantiality amidst the flames.

If this had been any other time, I might have laughed at Sirrahon's puzzled expression. But the dragon ignored the pooka from then on, and decided to start crunching forward on all fours deeper into the Fayleene Woods.

Liam stood in his way, looking like a child's toy set before the fully-grown monster. Before I could shout at him to get out of the way, the fayleene's antlers glowed with power again. The remaining thunderbird circled back into the fray and let out its keen whistle. With a *CRACKOOM*, a double-forked bolt of lightning stabbed from the clouds and hit Sirrahon in the chest. The dragon halted his forward charge and staggered for a moment.

Shaw, seeing his foe stagger, dove in to slice at the dragon's head again.

But that was a feint. And our griffin fell for it.

With the quickness of a striking snake, Sirrahon whirled to one side, smacking the incoming griffin with his tail. Shaw tumbled in midair, stunned. The dragon caught him in one taloned fist. All I could see was the griffin's dazed eagle head sticking out from the dragon's cruel fist.

"Oh, dear God–" I choked out.

Sirrahon squeezed.

Shaw let out a heart-rending squawk. The crisp *pop!* of a two-by-four announced the snap of one of his ribs.

Liam's eyes went blank as the thunderbird called down a second lightning strike. Galen called up a second energy sphere and hurled it at Sirrahon's side. I emptied the remaining bullets in my gun. All our blows made the creature flinch, but he refused to let go.

A second *pop*. Then a third.

"*Mon dieu*," Destry's voice whispered in my mind.

"Galen!" I cried, "Get Shaw out of there!"

The Wizard hesitated. "If I do, then I won't have the energy to get anyone else out of trouble."

Shaw's next squawk turned into a mewling cry of pain. A gout of bright red fountained from his beak.

"Do it! Now!"

Galen swung his hands forward, shouting his incantation. A white glow enveloped the griffin. Shaw vanished from the dragon's vise-like grip.

Sirrahon's beaklike snout grinned at us through a horrible skein of broken teeth. He crouched forward, his hungry eyes turned toward Liam a second time. The dragon's pose looked familiar.

In fact, it looked exactly like his sigil from the book in Galen's saddlebag.

"We have to change our tactics," I stated, as the Wizard trotted over. "All we're doing is annoying him."

Galen wiped a soot-stained brow clear with the sleeve of his now ruined jacket. "In that, I must agree."

"Before we left, Master Zenos found Sirrahon's sigil inside the Codex," I explained, as the forest shook with another of the dragon's mighty steps. "How can we use that in this fight?"

The Wizard shook his head. "I don't see how. A sigil is a magical seal. Used to bind creatures in caves and cells, or to magically repel someone from opening a secret scroll or document. None of which are applicable to our current predicament."

I fought down a wave of panic as Sirrahon split the world with his roar again. Think, think!

"Wait, wait! Zenos said that a sigil was a kind of 'seal', or a 'banner' of power. What does that mean in this world?"

"A banner is a flag that conveys a symbol, or a message. In combat, it is the formal declaration that a lord has decided to give battle."

I tucked away my gun, understanding. "Then that's what we have

to use it as."

Destry wavered into tangibility to our side. "Whatever you do, I would move *très vite*. The beast bears down upon the fayleene quite rapidly, no?"

A third crack of thunder was cut short as Sirrahon blasted Liam's remaining thunderbird out of the sky with a gout of flame. The time for debate was up.

"Destry," I said quickly, "You can get to Liam faster than we can. Tell him to do whatever he can to distract Sirrahon for the next half-minute. We have a plan."

The pooka bowed to us and winked out. Galen helped me mount up and then took off at a gallop towards the Protector. I held on to Galen's torso with one arm and turned around as best I could, opening the top of the nearest saddlebag. I had to hunt more by feel than sight, but I managed to grab the Codex and hold it tight.

A chorus of squeaks, trills, and squawks filled the air overhead. Birds of every color and shape, from magnificently tressed songbirds to spare, stern looking hawks erupted from the trees, all making a beeline for Sirrahon.

It looked like a pathetic excuse for a delaying action, but it worked. The clouds of birds completely blocked Sirrahon's vision. They pecked at the thinner scales of his eyes, his ears. The dragon raked his talons through the assembled flocks, smashing dozens of creatures at a time, but he had been stopped.

Galen stopped before where Liam stood atop a tiny rise at the edge of what remained of the Sacred Grove. Destry waited next to him, his form wavering between tangibility and phantasm. His eyes glowed as they continued to call and send birds against Sirrahon, but he sensed my approach as I dismounted.

"The birds are a clever stratagem," Galen remarked.

"Birds may be too small to stop a dragon," Liam said, with a smirk. "But I know how many there are in my forest. And I have a *lot* of them."

"Then before you run out, I've got a plan to try."

"That's the best news I've heard all day."

“The thing is…” I admitted, with a hard swallow, “That it puts you right in the line of fire. If it doesn’t work…”

“Then Sirrahon might as well slather me in barbeque sauce and have at it, as you might say.”

I blushed. I’d spoken those very words here in the grove. They didn’t sound very amusing now. But Liam shrugged it off and motioned me to go on.

I held up the Codex and then opened it to the page with Sirrahon’s blood-red sigil. “This book is infused with magic. And it’s got Sirrahon’s sign on it. A sign of power, or a ‘banner’. I’m betting that if you display it, challenge Sirrahon, that it will repel him.”

Liam thought about that for a moment. He sighed. “It’s that, or nothing. Give me the sigil to display.”

I considered how to secure the book to Liam’s frame. I decided to simply jam the open book between his newly grown antlers. To my amazement, the Codex fit snugly, and the nubs on the inside edges of his antlers worked to hold the pages open to the right place.

“Galen, if you have any magic left, help Liam project his voice, his image.” The Wizard nodded curtly as I turned to Destry. “I don’t think we can change our responses on the fly this time. But if you can read the dragon’s thoughts, his reactions…maybe we’ll at least know if this is going to work.”

“That I can do, Dayna,” the pooka agreed.

Sirrahon let out a bellow of triumph as he swiped away the last of the birds. Galen backed off to one side, murmuring his incantations. I remained where I was, Destry next to me. Liam took a few steps forward, head raised, the book perched securely in his antlers. The white glow around his eyes and antlers had been replaced by a blue one as Galen completed his spellcraft.

“Sirrahon!” Liam cried, and his voice boomed like surf against ocean cliffs. “Stay your wrath and come no further!”

The mighty dragon glared down at Liam. Stubs of broken teeth gleamed from deep within his mouth. A long scuff showing the mark of griffin talons trailed down one side of his head, while Galen and Liam’s lightning bolts had left dark blotches on several of his large,

flat scales. But aside from giving him a reason for a trip to the dentist, we really hadn't done the dragon any substantial physical damage.

But at least Liam had his attention. Now, as the rest of Galen's spellcraft took effect, the fayleene seemed to grow to five or six times his size. It was illusory, and still far too small to cause Sirrahon any alarm. But the image of the sigil had grown too.

And it had begun to throw off scarlet sparks as Liam raised his voice another notch.

"Do you know who I am, spawn of dragons?" Liam challenged, "I am the Protector of the Forest, the keeper of the Fey Magic that sustains the realm upon which you tread!"

Sirrahon let out a sound like a 'whuff'. A puff of black smoke billowed from his nostrils.

"Destry…" I said quietly, "what's the dragon doing?"

The pooka's brow furrowed.

"He is quite difficult to read. He is hesitant, that I can see. Ah, he has just checked his ability to breathe fire. He seems to be *sans carburant* now. Out of fuel to burn."

"Liam!" I called. "You've got Sirrahon worried! Press him harder! Use the knowledge we have of the last war!"

My voice sounded confident, but my knees trembled. This was one hundred percent pure bluff. And as my poker-playing friends would have pointed out, I was betting Liam's life on a pair of fives.

"I am the Protector of the Forest," Liam stated firmly. "And the blood of all the Protectors before me runs in my veins! The same blood that ran in the veins of the fayleene who stopped you all those centuries ago!"

Sirrahon froze, eyes riveted on Liam, on the sigil's glow.

"He's afraid!" Destry whispered, amazed. "The monster's actually afraid!"

"I, Liam of the Fayleene, cast you out of the sacred woods! Flee back to the darkness, ancient wyrm!"

To my amazement, Sirrahon took a step back. Liam matched it with a step forward. The sigil blazed from the book's page in a spangle of red. The dragon winced as the light danced in its eyes.

"*Flee!*" Liam bellowed. "*Flee, lest you be returned to the stone from whence you came!*"

Slowly, like a fully loaded supertanker, Sirrahon turned away from Liam. Turned away from the burning remnants of the Fayleene Woods. The world shook with each booming step. I held my breath until the shaking reduced itself to a mere tremor, and then finally receded into the distance.

Galen's spell dissipated, returning Liam to his normal size. The sigil held above his head dimmed in intensity, and then finally went out.

A strange near-silence fell over the smoking ruins of the Sacred Grove. The crackle of the remaining fires smoldering in the trees. The splash of water. And finally, the clip-clop of cloven hooves. The fayleene had emerged from the woods, many of them coated with ash or dripping cold stream water from their flanks and legs. The herd of fey deer surrounded us, focused solely on Liam. The Lead Doe named Orlaith stepped before him.

"You have saved us," she pronounced, though with a new, humble tone in her voice. "O great Protector, you have saved us from the dread beast and come into your own. We are your people, and you are our fey lord to command as you see fit!"

As one, the assembled fayleene bent their forelegs and went to one knee. A sea of bone-white antlers bowed before Liam, like a great wind bending back a gigantic stand of birch trees. And just when I didn't think things could get any more epic, the sun broke through the clouds. A shaft of golden sunlight sliced through the gap as if it could wash away the broken, burning remnants of the forest, and lit Liam up in a bright golden spotlight.

Galen made a choked sound of awe. Then followed the example of the fayleene by bending his equine forelegs and making a deep bow.

I felt a wetness upon my cheeks. Strangely, absently, I realized that they were tears.

Liam's eyes met mine, and they were charged with wonder and disbelief.

I nodded to him.

Then I bent my knee and knelt before my friend as well.

Oh, yeah, I thought to myself, as a fierce feeling of pride ran through me. *Not even Disney could top this.*

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Chapter Thirty-Two

The morning had come to an end before King Fitzwilliam and a dozen of his armored knights arrived at the Sacred Grove. Liam, flanked by a pair of the surviving Lead Does, stood along their path, waiting to greet them. We'd known of their coming for at least a quarter of an hour prior, as the jingle of steel and heavy tread of fully shod warhorses weren't exactly hard to miss.

Galen and I had just sat down for a quick swig of water from his goatskin and to share out the very last of the apples from his saddlebags. Destry stood in the shadows nearby, quietly observing all that went on. My fingers ached from all the work they'd been put to. Liam had summoned a new pair of thunderbirds to call down enough rain to put out the forest fires for good, and the clouds had blown away with the freshening breeze. But now that the threat of imminent death had receded, many of the fayleene had been left with cuts, scrapes, and burns.

I wasn't a doctor by any stretch of the imagination. But I knew enough anatomy so that I could put limbs in a sling. Under Galen's direction, Destry ranged out from the grove to locate deposits of healing mud and cooling moss that hadn't been dried out or burned up by the fires. Once the pooka had done this, the Wizard had led me through slathering on the mud and binding compresses made of the mosses.

The fayleene were quiet for the most part when I treated them, even borderline shocky, which was to be expected. And even though I'd had some rough treatment at their hooves, I was glad to help. I hadn't forgotten their medical assistance on my part when I'd suffered a concussion or even a cracked skull in their woods.

Fitzwilliam's knights glinted silver, red, and black in the sunlight. The king rode at the head of the column, clad in gold-washed chain mail to the neck. His head was bare, save for the golden circlet of the crown, and his long gray cloak flowed out behind him, covering his

saddle. He dismounted with a clink of his mail and then inclined his head towards Liam.

"Most honored Protector," he began. "Forgive my intrusion into your demesnes. I received word from two quarters that your realm had been set upon by a dragon and immediately set out to assist you. The treaty between the castle and the wood stands firm and binding between us."

"My thanks to you, King Fitzwilliam," Liam replied. "It is good the bond is firm, though as you can see, little enough of the wood remains. The dragon was driven off, though not without loss and suffering."

Fitzwilliam's kind face grimaced. "What are your losses, Lord of the Fayleene?"

"Seven dead. Many more burned, bruised, or battered. The nights ahead promise to be cold, bare, and short of food as well."

"It appears that I have arrived too late for battle," Fitzwilliam said, as his eyes took in the ruined trees and the soot-covered fayleene. "And I have no way to shelter your people. But perhaps I can help with the remaining problem. I have wagons of grain and greenery already rolling towards these woods. None shall go hungry, at least."

At that, I handed Galen his goat-skin of water and got to my feet. I approached the two monarchs as Liam made his own little bow to Fitzwilliam.

"Thank you, your Majesty," he said. "Whatever aid you can render us is sorely needed and quite welcome."

I cleared my throat softly. I still wasn't sure what the polite protocol was to break into an all-royal conversation. But I was so badly smudged with ash, mud, moss, and fayleene blood that I probably violated every rule in the court etiquette book just by standing upwind of the king.

"Ah, Lady Chrissie," Fitzwilliam said smoothly. "I am most pleased that you and the Court Wizard survived. Your griffin friend shall be pleased as well."

"That makes two of us, your Majesty," I agreed wholeheartedly,

before my brain caught up with his words. For his part, Liam's ears perked up immediately. "That is…I mean, is Grimshaw alive?"

"Indeed he is. I did say that I'd received news from *two* quarters, did I not? Master Seer Zenos came in the gray dawn with the news that Sirrahon had invaded the fayleene. Then, as my men were collecting their gear to join my expedition, your griffin appeared in the courtyard, complete with a trio of broken ribs. He confirmed what Zenos told us and despite his wounds offered to lead us back to you."

Liam snorted. "That sounds rather like our bone-headed griffin."

"I declined the offer and instead put him under the care of the Royal Air Cavalry's surgeon. The man's treated plenty of griffins before, so your friend is in good hands."

This time I bowed my head. "Your compassion is as deep as your wisdom," I said thankfully. "And on that note, I thought that I might put forth an idea for you to judge."

Liam gave me a curious glance. Fitzwilliam nodded curtly for me to go on.

"Much of the Fayleene Woods have been destroyed, particularly the old-growth trees that made up this grove. In short, this forest isn't much of a place to live anymore. Might I suggest a place on the border of your kingdom for the fayleene to dwell that hasn't been touched by conflict and loss?"

"I am all ears, Lady Chrissie."

"The forest where the centaurs and the humans meet would suit everyone's purpose. As a bonus, those woods contain the Grove of the Willows. To my mind, it couldn't hurt to have a people who are admired by both human and centaur there to guard the Grove and help it flourish."

Liam nodded appreciatively. "Indeed, it would be a fine place for my people to get back on all four feet. Are you willing to let us settle there, King Fitzwilliam?"

"I like the idea…" Fitzwilliam hedged. "But those lands lie athwart those of Lord and Lady Behnaz. If you can convince them to lay aside any objection, then I will give the move my blessing."

I smiled at that. "I can guarantee that Lady Behnaz will help us

out. And what she does with her land, her Lord will follow."

Fitzwilliam spread his hands. "Then it appears that you and the fayleene have everything in hand. We were not needed after all."

"No, not quite, your Majesty. I know who murdered Captain Vazura. And right now, I could really use a column of armed and armored knights to take him out. That is, if you're interested."

Fitzwilliam's eyes took on an eager, chilly look.

* * *

The afternoon was well advanced by the time the column of knights reached the first of the trio of streams that crossed the northern road into the mountains. Fitzwilliam had given me one of his knights' spare mounts, a spirited charger that shifted under my saddle like a restless racehorse. But any misgivings I had were muted by the presence of the king himself on one side and the Wizard on the other. Liam had stayed back to care for his people, but Destry ranged ahead of the group, scouting for any dangers we might encounter.

The ride had taken on a strangely quiet air. Galen had gone into a light meditative state, trying to build up some of his sorely depleted magic. The king and his men were terse, eyes uneasily tracking movements along their flanks or on the road ahead. Hands stayed close to sword hilts as we rode, and as far as I could see, the entire column was armed to the teeth. They'd set out this morning to possibly fight a dragon, and now they were drawing closer to a brand new foe.

As for me? I was quiet so that I could let the gears in that eight-ball of a brain of mine clatter away. The last piece – the way that foe had slaughtered Vazura and would likely defend itself – finally became clear to me. And it happened as soon as we'd begun to cross the wide banks of thumbnail-sized gravel washed down from the mountains.

"Mine tailings…" I mused, and Fitzwilliam gave me a curious look. "All these gravel banks are from mining operations. Your Majesty, would these be from the kingdom's *gold* mines?"

"Indeed," he answered. "Upriver are the veins from which have supplied most of the kingdom's gold or silver coinage over the years."

The last piece of the puzzle fell into my mind with a solid *click*.

"So that's how he kills," I breathed. "With cyanide from the kingdom's own mines."

The edge of Fitzwilliam's mouth curled up in his odd form of a smile. "Truly, how your intellect works is dizzying to witness. And yet my men and I are in need of your insights. You have told us how you suspect this 'Old Man of the Mountains'. Yet even I am puzzled as to how an ethereal demon could have killed so quickly. It seems that you have finally discovered the method."

I nodded. "The 'Old Man' is one of the demons mentioned in the Codex. One of the 'Creatures of the Dark' that were sealed by the victors inside the 'stones that lay among the mountains' at the end of the last 'Great War'. It's why Destry sensed that this spirit had visited your palace many times before. Over the eons, the account of that war was lost. That spirit could do no more than watch as King Julian raised your palace, as each of your forebears ruled and died in turn. And since no human knew the spirit's true identity, it became a folk legend."

"A being that knew things no material creature could," Fitzwilliam added, catching on. "I recall stories from my childhood. This 'Old Man' was someone who provided useful – and somewhat malicious advice."

"I learned from Destry that ethereals can, with practice, manipulate small objects." I looked upslope, where the dark woods stretched up the slope into the fog. "A weapon as light as a blowgun dart made of pine needles would be ideal. But a fragile weapon would need a potent poison to be effective. As it happens, up here in the mountains, it could access a pretty good supply of it."

Fitzwilliam raised an eyebrow. "Gold from my mines?"

"Not the gold. The solvent used to extract it." I rubbed my forehead absently as I went on, dredging up old memories from chemistry class. "There's not much gold in each ton of ore. In order to pull the metal from the rock, small-scale miners use mercury. Or cyanide salts. Tipping a dart with concentrated fluid from, say, the mine's tailing ponds would give you a weapon that could kill almost

instantly."

"That does add up, Lady Chrissie. But I still need ask: why kill one of my Captains? Why kill the Fayleene Protector? What could a rock-demon desire so strongly that it would be driven to the act of murder?"

Before I could answer, my mount suddenly shied away from something just ahead of it. I cried out in surprise, fighting the reins and probably doing just as much to discomfort the horse. Galen exhaled deeply and rubbed his eyes as he shook off his light trance. He quickly stepped to the charger's side, laid a hand on its mane, and spoke a quartet of magical words, calming it.

But the other horses in the column began to act similarly. Several knights had to fight to calm their mounts, and a couple swore under their breaths. A stiff breeze howled through the trees on either side of the stream. Destry appeared from his place at the head of the column, his eyes wide and nostrils flared.

Rocky's grandfatherly voice emerged from the swirls of wind. Only this time, the warmth of his ethereal speech was long gone. In its place lay a harsh, brittle undertone. One that made me think of the angry hum of bees when someone had poked their hive with a stick.

"What would drive a being like me to kill a human and a fayleene?" Rocky asked, in a sing-song manner. "Could it be that three thousand years of imprisonment inside a stone cell has driven me insane?"

"Dayna!" Destry's voice sounded in my head. "This spirit moves fast, faster than I!"

King Fitzwilliam's sword rang as he drew it from the sheath. His men followed suit.

"Where is he, then?" Fitzwilliam demanded. That startled me; Destry had evidently broadcast his speech to everyone in the party, and not just me. "Speak now, pooka!"

Destry's voice was full of alarm "I'm not sure…it feels like he is… all around us!"

And with that, the Old Man of the Mountain let out a phantom cackle that danced in the air around us, setting my nerves jangling

like I'd stuck a finger in an electric socket.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

The demon's ghostly cackle set my teeth on edge worse than steel-tipped fingernails on a blackboard. King Fitzwilliam frowned, and a couple of his knights gritted their teeth as they squinted around, looking for an excuse to hit something with their swords.

To my surprise, it was the Wizard who first found something intelligent to say.

"Perhaps you are insane," Galen remarked coolly. "Yet I doubt that is the case. Your acts were quite full of conscious meaning, as well as the times you chose *not* to act. I for one shall not forget that you purposely fogged Dayna's mind and sent her away instead of outright murdering her. You have a larger plan in mind. One that I look forward to finding out from you one way or another."

A ragged breath raked the air in the sudden silence.

Damn, I realized, *Galen actually surprised Rocky.*

"You are not as smart as you think, centaur. Come ahead if you want to find your answers."

And with a soundless ripple in the air, the presence withdrew.

"He is gone," Destry called, from his position at the head of the column.

The column's leaders looked around, unsure. Fitzwilliam's voice boomed out orders into the stillness.

"Your king did not call a halt! Back in formation!" A quick round of 'yes, Sire' from all around, and the fording of the streams got underway. Fitzwilliam hung back for a moment and spoke under his breath to me and Galen. "This voice on the wind is doubtless a harbinger of ill things, am I correct?"

"I'm afraid so, your Majesty," I answered. "Rocky wants us going up there. Where his power is strongest. I'm worried about traps."

"I must agree." Fitzwilliam waited until we'd finished the crossing and then ordered his knights to don their helmets. The king followed suit; he removed his crown and handed it to a squire for safekeeping.

He then pulled his hood of chain mail up into place and topped it with a gold-tinted helmet. “What do you think? Do we stand a chance against this demon’s arms?”

I considered. Fitzwilliam and his knights weren’t wearing the hinged great helms that one saw in the museum displays about jousting. Instead, these looked more like the kind the Roman legionaries wore – an open-faced helmet with wide cheek and nose guards. The rest of the Andeluvian kit was equally questionable. Chain mail, padded underneath with cloth or leather.

“It’s better than nothing, Sire,” I hedged. “But hardly dart-proof. Perhaps if you were to retire, to re-equip–”

He shook his head. “Nay, Lady Chrissie. If we do not press our foe, it gives him more time to plot, to counter our plans. He can move and strike us at will in my palace; I cannot do the same to him. We press on.”

That was the end of that argument. We continued upslope as the forest shifted from birch and elm to pines and the road turned into a series of muddy switchbacks. Another hour of climbing took us up to a jagged outcropping at the edge of one switchback’s hairpin turn.

“This is as far as we came, before,” I said. “From here to the summit, the way is only wide enough to go single file, at least on horseback. Then at the top, it’s a wide, boulder-strewn summit. This ‘Rocky’, or ‘The Old Man of the Mountains’, is a vine-draped granite boulder the size of an automobile.”

One of the knights at my left turned to face me. At a glance, I recognized Commander Yervan. He’d swapped out his gold-trimmed plate armor for the lighter chain mail, as the rest of the party had done. His brow furrowed under the ridge of his helmet.

“Pardon, Lady Chrissie. The size of a what?”

I reddened. It was easy to forget that no one had visited my world save for my closest friends.

“The size of a large wagon,” I amended quickly. “Unfortunately, I doubt that this type of creature will fall to the blow of a sword.”

“That is troublesome. But when we learned about the dragon attacking the fayleene, we came armed for most any trouble.” Yervan

issued a set of terse orders. The knights dismounted and stowed away their swords and pulled out either battle axes or blunt-tipped war hammers from their kit. “These should serve to shatter stone well enough. Failing that, we have a sapper’s charge with us as well.”

“Very good,” Fitzwilliam said approvingly, as both he and I dismounted as well. “We’ll see what stuff this demon is made of when it’s shattered into a million pieces.”

Destry phased into existence at my side, watchful but quiet as each knight strapped a small triangular shield onto one arm and began heading up the slope. Galen stood on my other side, while the king bade me to fall in behind him. It was quiet now as we ascended the slope, save for the heavy breathing of the men, the clink and creak of armor, and the occasional *clop* of Galen’s hoof on some half-buried rock along the path. Fog blew in from above, shrouding everything in gray. I could barely make out the head of the column, and I was all too aware that evening was only a few hours away.

The men at the front of the column crested the rise ahead. I heard a disturbed murmuring from the knights at the vanguard. Frowning, King Fitzwilliam picked up his pace. I followed as well, almost at a run. The fog had parted for a moment, and the view at the top through the haze had taken on the reddish glow of the late afternoon.

I felt my heart sink.

The entire summit had been covered with near-identical, vine-covered boulders.

A collective *creak* as the knights turned to look at me.

“Can you tell which is our quarry?” Fitzwilliam asked.

I shook my head.

“Right.” He raised his voice again. “Spread out, all of you! Our foe shall not lie passive; he shall take an action that will give himself away.”

With a jingle of mail, the knights began to move into position. Fitzwilliam waited, hefting his axe in one hand as if daring something to jump out for him to chop.

“Illusion spell,” murmured Galen. “It has to be.”

I heard a cackle then. A tinny, not-quite-human laughter. The

sound was distant at first, floating along the breeze. Then it got louder, echoing off the stones around us. The fog grew denser, darker.

Rocky's voice erupted out of the laughter, the voice of an old man whose sanity had been eroded away by centuries of solitude and confinement.

"Oh, Dayna," it said mournfully, "Why couldn't you have just followed my orders and killed Lady Behnaz? Everything would have been so much easier! The fayleene would have been destroyed and Sirrahon would be running rampant! And as a bonus, the humans would have been at each other's throats over Behnaz's death!"

I didn't have a target, but I drew my gun anyway. Three, maybe four shots left. They weren't much good against an ethereal, but I'd spend the shots wisely. I fought to keep my voice in check as I shouted back into the wind.

"Sorry I couldn't do your dirty work, Rocky!"

"But it was so little to ask! I mean, I already worked so hard to pave the way for you."

"How?"

"By a few well-placed murders, of course! I even bent the will of one of the best and brightest fayleene, just to turn him against his own people!"

King Fitzwilliam stepped up, his face creased with anger under his helmet.

"By all that is sacred, monster, why attack us?" he demanded. "The fayleene, the humans, we have done nothing to you, and yet you attack and slay our people with impunity! What do you want, foul being, in that dark heart of yours?"

The voice took on a gloating tone. "What I want is quite simple. I want my people to rule this world as they once did, with my kind and my allies grinding our enemies into the dirt! Open your eyes, human knave. You are witnessing the re-birth of powers that have laid dormant and buried for eons. Sirrahon has woken. I set him upon the fayleene like a hungry wolf among the sheep. I even killed the older, experienced Protector and then set two of his princelings at each other's throats!"

"By promising one the secret of driving off Sirrahon," I breathed. "All the while making sure that the other – Liam – got no help at all."

"And you did that by murdering one of my captains," Fitzwilliam finished. "Then blood lies between us, demon. Blood which must be repaid. You shall answer for the deaths of the Fayleene Protector and the commander of my kingdom's Air Cavalry, and your admitted attempts to throw my kingdom into war and desolation!"

An evil chuckle. "Your 'Lady Chrissie' likely told you how hard it is for we ethereals to manipulate material objects. But we can. It took years, you know. Years to craft my darts. Years to gather up the poison. Years to learn how to coalesce my spirit into shape and attack…to kill…to rend…*to tear you to bits!*"

Rocky's dust-demon form swirled into existence above us. A shout from the knights as they spotted the apparition. Followed by a deadly string of *thwips* as a volley of darts rained down as if fired from a Gatling gun.

Curses and oaths as knights hurried to raise their shields or step behind cover. Galen shouted a harsh magic word, swatting a dart from the air before him. Fitzwilliam brought up his arm, shielding both me and himself from the darts that *pinged* off his shield. But a pair of screams told me that some of Rocky's missiles had found their mark.

The barrage didn't let up, either. Galen danced back and forth on his hooves, trying to summon his power, but he had to focus on swatting darts from the air around him. Three knights tried to charge forward, until a hail of darts forced them to a halt. Two made it to cover, while the last one caught a razor-sharp needle in the face. The man let out a full-throated scream as he collapsed, twitched violently for a moment, and then lay still.

I swung out from behind Fitzwilliam's shield and brought my gun to bear. I squeezed off a pair of shots. The bullets passed harmlessly through Rocky's dusty midsection, but it must have disturbed his ability to hold the form. The dust demon vanished in a puff of air.

"Keep moving forward!" Fitzwilliam bellowed. "Those damned darts can't penetrate your armor, your shield! Use them!" The king lowered his voice as he added, "Stay close to me, Lady Chrissie. It

seems that I can shield you long enough for you to at least disrupt the creature."

We pressed on another ten, twelve steps. Past one of the bodies of the first knights that had fallen. One of Rocky's missiles lay buried in the man's throat. His eyes bulged from a red, swollen face. I swallowed hard and looked away.

The minutes ticked on by, feeling like hours. Each rock that we came to had been draped in vines, shaped by magic or illusion to look just like Rocky himself. Finally, the tension became too much for one of the youngest of the knights. He raised his iron maul as he stood and cried, "Show yourself, monster!"

A bolt of lightning slashed down through the fog. The bolt struck his upraised weapon with the sizzling sound of bacon dropped on a hot griddle. The man jerked inside his armor and fell forward with a *clank*. Greasy smoke oozed out from below his helmet.

A collective waver ran through the remaining knights. Naked fear showed on their faces for a moment before they clamped down on their emotions. Still, it rocked me to see it.

The shout came from the left. "There he is!"

The swirling demon form materialized overhead again. Galen hurled a bolt of energy, dispelling it, but not until it spat out a trio of shots. And another of Fitzwilliam's knights lay dying on the ground, a dart lodged deep in his eyeball.

"That was fast work, Wizard," Fitzwilliam said quietly.

"Not fast enough, alas," came the reply.

"Galen," I said, "We need to find Rocky before he whittles this column of knights down to nothing! Can you dispel his illusions?"

"I've been trying." The centaur's voice boomed as he added, "*A fháil ar shiúl ó anseo*!"

A flash of blue light lit up the fog for a split second. But nothing else changed.

The pooka materialized by my side as he spoke. "Perhaps he has proofed his *enchantement* so that it may not be dispelled."

A nod from Galen. "I believe that is the case. I should be able to cast a spell on this being to put him in stasis, if I can locate him. But

he's certainly had time to prepare for anything expected."

That got me thinking. Rocky may have prepared for the expected…but by definition, he couldn't do the same for the things he couldn't expect at all.

What did we have to throw at him that fit the bill?

I thought back to our investigation. When Galen had come up with his brilliant idea: If we do indeed have a non-corporeal being to deal with, it would be to our advantage if we also had one on our side.

An ethereal wouldn't expect us to use *another* ethereal against it.

I remembered something that had struck me as a little odd. From the conversation that I'd had with Destry just before my probation hearing.

I had asked, *"Can you change someone's mind? Influence them to do something?"*

His answer: *"Ah, the pooka do not have that power."*

And then my mind made a final *click* as I realized what Destry was hiding. What all the pooka had been hiding, behind their scary exterior and their dream-magic.

Destry hadn't lied. Not exactly. The *pooka* didn't have the power to change someone's mind. But *he* sure as hell did. It was exactly what he had done to Bob McClatchy and, to a lesser extent, to my friend Shelly Richardson.

"Destry!" I hissed urgently, as Rocky's incessant laughter echoed in the stone around us, "It's up to you. You're going to have to take Rocky out for us. Get him to expose himself. At least until Galen can get that stasis spell on him."

A shake of the head, and a snort. "I'm not sure what you mean, *chére*. I cannot 'take him out', as you put it, for I am only a pooka."

"No, you're not!" I snapped, and Destry danced a step back. In the distance, a cry from a knight and the sound of darts pinging off armor. I ignored it as best I could. "Destry, you're *more* than a typical pooka! You know this, but you've been denying it to yourself!"

King Fitzwilliam frowned and threw a quick glance at me over his raised shield. "Lady Chrissie, is this really the time to be giving your

friend a therapy session?"

"I'm afraid it is, Sire." I turned back to Destry. "You have the ability to tap into someone's memories, their emotions, and bend them to your will!"

"Of course," Galen breathed. "Like you did to Dayna's obstreperous supervisor!"

"I…but…" Destry shied away. "I wasn't able to control my power. I enchanted your friend, too. How can I risk these *chevalier d'armes* here?"

"Perhaps you cannot, but I can!" Fitzwilliam put in, as another of his men fell screaming. "And I am losing them with each second you hesitate. I charge you, pooka: save us if you can! I will absolve you of any misstep."

Destry blinked, and then nodded. "What shall I do, Dayna?"

"You were able to latch onto strong emotions and memories from McClatchy," I said. "Do the same thing here with this 'Old Man'. Follow the memories back to the source. And then amplify whatever unpleasantness you find there! Bury him in it!"

"Yes," Galen said, catching on. "Shock him for but a second. Show me his position and I can cast my stasis spell!"

Destry nodded his agreement. With a tiny *whoosh*, he vanished. I took a deep breath and stepped out in front of the King's shield. Every inch of my exposed skin crawled as if it were on fire. Each tiny breeze felt like the tug of a needle-tipped dart.

"Rocky!" I shouted. "This slaughter is senseless! This war of yours is long over! No one today even knows about it! Don't you see? Everyone you ever fought for, everyone you fought against is dead!"

A moment passed before I got an answer. I couldn't see the swirl of dust in the fog.

"Not everyone," Rocky intoned. "Sirrahon is still alive. So are many of the others. Others of my allies who shall also rise to claim their place in the sun!"

"And what of your enemies? Sure, if your friends survived, so have your foes! Think of them, what they have done to your kind." I shrugged. "It couldn't have been anything important, though. I mean,

none of us have ever heard of what they did to you."

"Nothing important?" Rocky tone took on a fever pitch. "I shall bring flaming wrath down upon all those who stood in the light! For chaining my soul to this terrible place! For thousands of years of confinement, for thousands of years in horrible…"

Destry materialized off to the right. He reared, snorting, and I heard his softly accented voice in my head as he spoke words that sent a chill down my spine.

"So that is what you fear most, *mon ami?* Then I have you, *illusionniste!* Taste your fear, multiplied a hundred times!"

The big black horse's eyes blazed.

An unearthly scream shook the air around us. Rocky flung a torrent of poison darts at Destry with his remaining strength. The points made a sound like hailstones on a tin roof as they passed harmlessly through the pooka and ricocheted off the rock below.

Then Destry's form winked out.

He reappeared atop one of the rocks just ahead of us. His forehoof tapped the vine-covered granite boulder for a moment before he vanished again.

"Galen!" I cried. "That's it, that's the Old Man of the Mountain!"

"*Kasta uit illum andal!*" the Wizard shouted.

He flung his arm up towards the rock Destry had just vacated.

A dark blue shimmer surrounded the stone.

Another unearthly scream rent the air. Part of the shimmer peeled away. As if bent back by a powerful, unseen force. Sweat beaded Galen's brow, and he redoubled his efforts, shouting his voice raw.

"He is fighting me!" he cried, and then cast his incantation a second time. "*Kasta uit illum andal!*"

The blue shimmer began to close. The screams turned into roars of raw rage and pain.

"Destry!" I shouted, "If you can hear me, use all of your power!"

The pooka must have been listening, as Rocky's raging screams and roars began to crack and warp into plaintive cries, whimpers of fright.

Galen's voice all but gave out as his incantation a final time.

“*KASAT UIT ILLUM ANDA!*”

The voice of the Old Man of the Mountain finally went silent. As if it had been smothered by a very large, very heavy pillow.

King Fitzwilliam went up to the blue-sheened rock and spat on it.

“And a damned good riddance to you, demon,” he pronounced with finality.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

The sun was bright, the sand under my toes was warm, and the surf beat out a gentle throb that sounded heavenly. The sharp salty tang of the sea was a welcome treat to my nose after having been through a forest fire only two days before. I pushed my sunglasses further up my nose and absently wished that I'd brought some sunblock to Andeluvia. I still hadn't spotted what I was looking for in the sky, but it didn't bother me. I was having too much fun listening to my friends' conversation.

Shaw poked at the bandages that wrapped around his torso like a king-sized straitjacket, albeit one that had had its sleeves removed. He swore under his breath and made as if to chew at them until a pair of antlers rapped his beak in warning.

"That's enough, featherhead," Liam said. "Otherwise, they're never going to heal."

Shaw gave his companion a sour look. Liam, for his part, had gone back to wearing the emerald-encrusted barding across his back and atop his head. He gleamed so brightly in the sunlight that at times he made my eyes water.

"Sixty years," Shaw grumbled. "Sixty years hath I seen battle, and 'ere my death, I am bossed around by a young buck. 'Tis as the bards say! Truly, there is no justice in this world."

Liam let out a snort. "When I saw blood spew from your mouth, I thought that your ribs had been jabbed through your lungs. I thought you dead for sure. So, I'm sure that it was grossly unfair that you survived to tell the tale."

"Alas, t'was not blood. My ribs were cracked, not punched in like barrel staves! What you saw were the remnants of my meal with the Albess, as my stomach was squeezed as much as anything else." The big griffin looked positively glum as he added, "And aye, unfair it was, at that! I had the chance to die most gloriously at the claws of the greatest dragon yet seen by the world, and lo! That reward was denied

me."

I put my hand on the griffin's shoulder and stroked it sympathetically.

"Shaw, I'm sorry I ruined your hopes," I said gently. "But think of this another way. Rocky said that he summoned Sirrahon in hopes of re-kindling his Great War. Though he failed in doing that, he certainly unleashed the dragon and let it loose upon the world."

"Might we face Sirrahon again?" Shaw's face looked hopeful.

"It's certainly possible. And when you do meet him…it will be a *grudge match*. Whether you win or lose, do you think the bards will be able to resist singing about the re-match between the greatest dragon and griffin warriors to ever live?"

In response, Shaw let out a sound between a sigh and a contented purr. Liam rolled his eyes.

"Truly," Galen murmured, "you know how to play that griffin like a fine instrument."

"Hush, now," I scolded him gently. "Do you think that the griffin elders' plan is a smart one?"

"I believe so." The Wizard absently scratched one of his own bandages as he spoke. Galen hadn't suffered any broken bones, but he'd suffered a handful of painful scorches along his arms and equine torso from our fight with Sirrahon. "Rocky's stone had been enchanted against chipping or breaking, so I doubt that any of Fitzwilliam's arms or explosives would have had much effect. It was a perfect prison for more than three thousand years. In all certainty, it is what drove the demon insane."

The wind shifted, and suddenly the dull thumps of dozens of wings echoed in my ears. Three whole battalions of griffins, many clad in the royal armor of Fitzwilliam's Air Cavalry, broke out of the clouds by the shoreline and headed out to sea. Heavy lines dangled from their forepaws, ending in a cat's' cradle of rope that all but mummified the demon's prison stone.

"The griffins' suggestion is borne out by my research," Galen continued. "Ethereal beings cannot communicate or manifest through water. So this seems like quite a good way to take our Old Man of the

Mountain out of the equation for a long, long time."

The cloud of griffins flew far enough out to sea so that each of the large creatures was no more than a golden or white splotch against the sky. A single *caw* rippled through the host.

As one, they released their payload.

The 'Old Man' that had assassinated Liam's predecessor, murdered Captain Vazura, and nearly got me to kill Lady Behnaz plunged into the ocean with an almost comical *sploosh*. A tight band of emotion inside of me relaxed as the plume of water subsided and even the ropes holding the stone slipped beneath the waves. I let out a breath of relief as the griffins dispersed to all points of the compass.

Liam's ear flicked back and forth. "I'm sensing something approaching. A lot of somethings, actually."

A familiar shimmer rippled through the air just down the beach from us. A *big* shimmer. Shaw let out a squawk of amazement and even Galen took a step back as the shimmer turned into an entire herd of pitch-black horses with wild manes and pupil-free yellow eyes.

It looked like the *pouquelaye* had decided to finally show up.

The horses stood in place, making a decidedly menacing-looking dark line along the expanse of beach. A couple snorted and pawed the sand, but the others simply looked on with their impassive citrine eyes.

Destry and the herd's lead mare, Reveé, trotted forward a few steps to stand in front of me.

"I am Reveé, the Dream Speaker," the mare pronounced, in her lightly accented voice. "It is I who lead the people who bring the terrors of the night!"

"Yes," I said wryly, "I kind of caught that the first time around."

"I have spoken with the liaison we provided you for your investigation," she said, with a toss of her head. "We are only half-pleased with the way that you have kept your side of the bargain."

I had sort of been expecting this, but it still rankled me. "Why only half-pleased?"

"Because while you have found the source of his fear, you have not dispelled it."

“That’s because it’s not a fear, or a phobia!” I shot back. “Destry suffers from a birth defect, one that has no known cure! You cannot blame him for that, any more than I could blame a human child for being born without hands!”

“Or a griffin chick for being hatched without wings,” Shaw said sternly.

“Or a centaur foal without hooves,” Galen put in.

“Or a fayleene fawn without luck,” Liam said, and his face had a sad, strange look.

Reveé looked back at her herd for a moment. She blew a breath out noisily through her nostrils, the way horses did. Finally, she turned to us, and spoke more softly this time.

“We realize the truth of what you say. It greatly saddens us, for we feel that we have been saddled with a turn of chance that may decide all our fates. But we shall not unmake him.”

I didn’t let it show on my face, but I did feel good about that. One victory, at the very least.

Reveé cast her gaze upon Destry and added, “Destarius de Revasser, it is not your fault that you carry this ‘birth defect’. It is the fault of we who made you, and the will of the Grand Creator who guided our hooves. I shall not banish you. And you may come and go amongst us as you please. But you may not truly join your people so long as it robs your stallionhood of its strength in either light or dark.”

Destry bowed, once. His eyes fixed resolutely upon the ground before him.

And with that, the entire herd shimmered into nothingness like so much smoke on the wind.

None of us trusted ourselves to speak.

It was Destry who pawed at the warm beach sand for a moment before coming over to us.

“I…am not certain of what to say,” he began. “I am an ethereal, yes, but only now do I feel like I am made of nothing. Like I have nothing left.”

“You do have something,” I insisted.

“*Quoi?*”

“You have us four. And sometimes, you need to find a sense of family with people who are good. Rather than to try and find good in one’s own family.”

Shaw purred his agreement. Liam stomped his forehoof, while Galen nodded appreciatively. I reached up and put my arms around Destry’s warm, equine neck and hugged him close.

It was the one drop of pure joy that day.

A single drop, mixed in with a sea of worries.

I thought on what Zenos had told me already about the Codex. Maybe we’d already nipped the return of this old war in the bud. To be on the safe side, I’d be borrowing both books that the soothsayer had given me for a while.

Destry hadn’t been re-united with his people. Liam had, but at the cost of one of the other fayleene princelings. A princeling that was still angry, and on the loose.

And Sirrahon was out there now. I didn’t think for a moment that anything of his size would remain out of sight for long.

So very little had been completely settled. Did anything in life ever resolve itself neatly, like a mathematical formula, and stay that way forever-and-ever, amen? I didn’t think my rotten luck would ever let that happen.

All I knew at least was that I was among my friends. My family, if you will. I never in my wildest dreams thought it would be a family with so many hooves and feathers. But the one thing that shines out from them is that they’re *good*.

And that’s all that matters, in the end.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Warm mist flowed from between my lips like steam from the spout of a boiling tea kettle. Ice rimed the bare tree trunks around me. I shivered. It was a frigid December in the woods of Pike County, Illinois.

I'd just turned seven.

I took a step, heard a crunch and looked down. As I half-expected, instead of seeing the little pink wigwam boots I'd worn back then, I saw something else. My thick-soled black boots that I wore for my crime-scene investigation work. I'd nicknamed them my 'stompy gothic boots of doom', and for good reason.

They kept corpse juice out of my socks. And they kept snow out too, as I plowed my way through the drifts, following the blood trail that stood out against the snow. The line of droplets meandered drunkenly between the trees, tracing the path of the dying fayleene doe my father had shot all those years ago.

I followed the trail back towards my family's house. The glow of the Christmas lights from our porch made the icicles that perched along the edge of our frozen gutter sparkle red and green, like iridescent glow-sticks. I'd never noticed that before.

My feet carried me along the side of our driveway, past our beat-up station wagon and up to the garage's side door. I reached out to grab the knob. Lime-green flecks of paint flaked off on my glove as I turned it.

I pushed the door open.

Smell of paint thinner and gasoline and blood.

The all-weather bulb inside the garage hung from the rafters by a single paint-spattered cord. Daddy's orange hunting vest was streaked with red. He knelt before the white, coffin-shaped chamber, sobbing as he gazed upon the bony nubs of antler that projected from within.

My insides turned to water as the fayleene doe sat up in the freezer with a dull *thump*.

Her eyes were the soft brown of kitten fur, and so full of life that it made me ache inside.

"This wasn't your fault, you know," she said.

"It…it wasn't?" I gasped.

My father stopped crying. His hands dropped to his sides and his face had taken on a look of amazement and disbelief. The fayleene doe spoke to him as she climbed out of the freezer, hale and whole.

"You've been weeping over my death for long enough," she said gently. "It is time for both of you to forgive yourselves."

"I didn't know what you were," my father said. "Please, you must believe me."

"I believe you. What happened between us was a horrible quirk of fate, but one we must put aside. For the sake of your daughter. She has no dark secret to hide."

"Yes," my father choked out, and his tears finally stopped flowing. "Dayna, forgive me…I was out of my mind with grief. What I said…it was out of love, but the way it came out turned it into something bad. Something that kept cropping up here, in your dreams."

"I forgive you, Daddy," I said, and somehow, even as an adult, I managed to fold myself in his arms. I felt his strength, his warmth, his fatherly love radiate through his hunting jacket and into my soul. He held me for a moment, and then I stepped back to look at the fayleene again. I knelt in front of her, the way I'd knelt in front of Liam as he'd finally claimed his place among his people. "Thank you for forgiving me."

A smile of sorts crossed her deer face. "You knew that you had no guilt for what happened on that day."

"I knew it there," I said, pointing at my head. The doe nodded as I went on. "But I had to hear it from you. So that I would know it *here*."

And I pointed at my heart.

The doe leaned forward and kissed me on my forehead.

I woke in my old bed. My old house, back in Los Angeles. An unseasonably cold morning sun peeked in through the window. The first thing I did was to feel my forehead. Seeking out the damp spot where the doe had bestowed her kiss upon me.

A Gallic chuckle from beside the bed.

At least this time, I didn't scream like a little girl as I turned my head to see the big, black pooka standing by my bed. He looked faintly amused.

"Destry!" I said, as I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "I was wondering if you were going to stop by. After our time on the beach…no one's seen or heard from you over the past few days. Are you all right?"

"*Suis bien.* I am well enough, Dayna," he said, with a horsey shrug. "I am wandering the world, thinking things over. Trying to understand my place in it."

I got up, stretched, and then straightened out my cotton top and capri pajama pants. Somewhat belatedly, I realized that things definitely had changed in my life. I mean, magical nightmare horses showing up in my bedroom hardly fazed me anymore.

"If you need to bend someone's ear, you know that my door's always open, right?"

"My kind do not use doors, Dayna."

"*Touché*," I admitted. "But you know what I mean. And you might also consider speaking more with Liam of the Fayleene."

"The new Protector? *Pourquoi?*"

"He knows what it's like to be where you are."

Destry mulled that one over for a bit as I padded out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, following the blessedly caffeinated smell of my coffee maker. I'd set the timer so that I'd have a fresh pot upon waking. I poured myself a cup, inhaled, and then took a sip before my pooka friend spoke again.

"I will definitely be visiting the Fayleene Woods – the new woods, that is. And…I was wondering if you might answer a question that occurred to me in my travels last night."

I took a bigger sip, one that threatened to morph into a full-bore slurp. "Be my guest."

"I sensed your distress when you learned that the *pouquelaye* would likely un-make me. That is, if you could not find out what was wrong with me."

"I was 'distressed', yes."

“But it occurred to me…while you and your friends did speak up on my behalf, I did not sense fear or distress from you right before Reveé made up her mind. To let me live, and not return me to the ether. Why was that?”

I smiled. “I knew that at the worst, they would banish you. That’s not pleasant, but it’s a lot less final than death. Or ‘un-making’, as you ethereals seem to put it. Again, talk to Liam. He’s trodden the same path.”

“But you knew that they would not ‘kill’ me?”

“I had a hunch. And I think I’ve confirmed it, if you’re interested.”

Destry snorted. “Of course, *chére!*”

I went over to the kitchen table, where I’d spread out the Codex and Zenos’ translation book. I flipped through the Codex’s pages, over to one that I’d marked with a sticky note.

“There’s still an awful lot of unanswered questions,” I began. “For example, how many people know about this ‘Great War’ besides Rocky and Sirrahon. But I can tell you one thing: at least some of the peoples mentioned in the Codex know what’s coming. And I think they’re already moving behind the scenes.”

“You mean the dragons. The demons. The griffin elders.”

“Yes, and one more.” I tapped the page about halfway down, where I’d put a couple more stickies crammed with my shorthand notes. “I’ve been reading through the translation book. It’s tough going, but I think it’s helped me figure out a couple more of the words from the Codex. And there’s one you’ll find fascinating.”

The pooka craned his neck to see over my shoulder as I went on.

“On the side of the ‘Creatures of the Light’, there’s two runes stacked together, naming one of the peoples. The first rune means ‘horse’. The second, I believe, is ‘dream walker’.”

Destry let out a startled whicker of surprise. “My people…the *pouquelaye?*”

I nodded. “And that got me thinking about one last thing. When your people first dropped you off here, they didn’t ask me to simply ‘help you overcome your fears’. They were very specific. They said, ‘one of our number cannot fulfill the function for which he was born’.”

"Then the reason I was born…*c'est incroyable*…"

"Yes. I think it's an awfully big coincidence that a pooka was born who could mentally dominate an enemy. It would be a big advantage if this war of theirs actually came to pass. And that gives me hope that in time, they'll accept you back into your herd."

"Why?"

"Because they can't afford not to."

Destry made a little bow. "You've given me a lot to think about, Dayna. *Merci*. Sleep well, for I think you shall have fewer nightmares from now on."

He faded away with a little *whoosh*.

I got up, set my coffee aside, and went to look at the calendar. I'd been so busy, that I'd forgotten which day it was. Saturday, as it happened.

I considered for a moment.

Maybe Destry's not the only one who needs to find out where he stands, I thought. *It's worth a shot, anyway.*

I picked up my phone and unhooked it from the charger. Then I scrolled through the list of numbers and selected the one I wanted.

Three rings, and a pickup.

"Hello?" said a sleepy, but pleasantly surprised male voice.

"Alanzo," I greeted him, "I'm sorry that I'm calling so early…I just didn't want to take the chance of missing you."

"*De nada*," he said, chuckling. "I said you could call me anytime, and I meant it."

"Oh, thank goodness." I cleared my throat, tried to summon up the same courage that I'd tapped into when I'd met Sirrahon. "I was wondering…if you have any time today, or this evening…would you like to get together?"

"I think I can move some things around," he said, and I could hear the beam of his smile over the phone. "The thing with your friend… did it get taken care of?"

"Mostly. The proverbial can of worms, if you know what I mean."

"Well…care to tell me about it over some dim sum? How about that place on Hill and Sixth, 'round half-past-ten?"

It was my turn to beam. Alanzo knew that I loved Chinese cuisine in all forms, even for brunch.

"You're on. Meet you there?"

"Count on it, Dayna."

I hung up the phone and went back to the bedroom to get dressed.

Yes, it was just my luck.

It looked like the start of a beautiful day.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *The Deer Prince's Murder*, the second book in the 'Fantasy & Forensics' series. I've always been a big fan of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, though I wanted to give a rather different take on the forest creatures one normally sees in fantasy literature. They might be cute and cuddling looking at a distance, but decidedly less so up close.

Speaking of things that are less-than-cuddly, it's worth seeing what the griffins are up to in the next book!

Michael Angel

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BOOK THREE: GRAND THEFT GRIFFIN

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Chapter One

Folk music singers may call the wind Mariah, but in Los Angeles they give it a darker name. Newscasters in fall's slick new fashions describe the gusts off the desert plateaus to the east of the city as the Santa Ana. But the cops know better. They call it *el viento del diablo*, the Devil's Wind, and it does strange things to people at a time when the rest of the country is out shopping for witches' hats and carving pumpkins.

I don't think anyone arrested by the LAPD claimed 'the Devil's Wind made me do it'. But whenever the autumn gusts kicked up, we got a statistical bump in the number of people who decided to forcibly reduce the city's population by one or more. We also got a rash of assorted crimes involving someone else's person or property.

Like tonight's reported burglary.

Whoever committed the crime hadn't been particularly thoughtful about my schedule. My phone's ringtone jolted me from a sound sleep at a hair past oh-my-god-it's-still-pitch-black-out. I sat up with a groan and groped for the damned phone a second or two before finally grasping it and squinting at the screen. A text message told me to get my sleepy butt out of bed and over to the Natural History Museum in the next twenty minutes.

Coffee was out of the question. I stumbled to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and give my teeth a quick brush. My lips felt leathery and my throat scratchy from the unpleasantly dry fall weather, but a quarter-cup of liquid direct from the tap fixed that up. Then I fished a handful of jumbo bobby pins out of a bowl by the bathroom sink to fasten my hair back into a loose black bun. I squinted at the result.

Awful, but not quite awful enough to scare kids or dogs. *Large* dogs, anyway.

I had temporary custody of the departmental van from the Office of the Medical Examiner, so I grabbed the keys and took it downtown.

As I made my way down the dark asphalt expanse of the freeway, it occurred to me that I really couldn't complain all that much. Being on call during the graveyard shift wasn't exactly a plum assignment. But when you came right down to it I was lucky to be working at all.

It had been more than three months since I'd first been 'summoned' to the mystical world of Andeluvia. Two months since I'd helped my friends fight off the stone dragon, Sirrahon. And four whole days since I'd finally gotten the paper-pushers under Deputy Chief Bob McClatchy to completely restore my field privileges. A few days on the night shift hadn't done any favors for my complexion, but it was a price I was willing to pay.

However, this particular call was a puzzling one from the get-go. The police code from the text message was a 459. A 459-Sam, to be specific. That meant a silent alarm had been tripped. My feelings were mixed. Since this wasn't a homicide, it wasn't likely that I'd be applying my Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending). Then again, the one constant in crime scene analysis was that it was *expensive*. If something had been stolen from the museum, it had to be darned important for me to get called out for it.

The sky had decided to turn a delightful shade of predawn gray as I parked the beat-up van in front of the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. The parking lot wasn't as empty as it should have been at this hour. A quintet of police cruisers, lights still flashing, clustered around the sweeping marble steps that framed the museum's entrance.

Off to one side, one of the largest armored trucks I'd ever seen had pulled up into the loading zone. Men in unmarked black suits were busy setting up their own security cordon. A pair of LAPD officers posted by the yellow crime-scene taped perimeter watched the activity with poorly concealed interest.

I got out, pointedly ignored the smell of dust that hung in the air, and went around to the back of my van to suit up. Off with the comfy flats and on with my Stompy Gothic Boots of Doom. As a final touch, I pulled on a gray hairnet and topped it off with a brand-new baseball cap. This one was marked with a bright red 'A' logo ringed by a golden halo.

Some of the beat cops razzed me about it and told me I should move down to Anaheim and put Mickey Mouse on my autopsy slab. Actually, I didn't follow major league baseball one bit. But after having my Dodger's cap shot off by a rifle bullet, I didn't want to jinx myself.

I grabbed the battered aluminum case that held my crime scene gear and slammed the van's doors shut, then made my way over to where the two lookie-loos in uniform continued to follow the goings-on in the loading zone. One of them finally snapped to when I walked up and flashed my badge.

"Office of the Medical Examiner," I said.

My badge and I got a quick once-over and curt nod in response. Then the officer toggled the hand mic he had clipped to the front of his uniform.

"Victor One, the Oh-Em-Ee just showed up. It's Chrissie."

"About time she got here. Send her in."

That got an eyebrow raise out of me. The voice on the other end of the line was masculine, and it sounded familiar, but a name didn't leap to mind. And whoever it was had apparently steered this call over to me on purpose.

The officer lifted the tape barrier for me to cross and addressed me once more. "Look to your right once you go through the entrance. The area of interest is at the end of the hall. You won't be able to miss it."

"Right." I ducked my head so my cap would clear the sticky edge of the tape.

I hefted my case up the marble steps, then pushed my way through a set of bronze doors large enough for one of the main passageways beneath Fitzwilliam's castle. My nose expected a shift from the dust outside to cooler, conditioned air inside. Two steps and as many breaths changed my mind in a hurry.

On the outside, some traditionalist-minded architect had designed the museum in the flowery style of the Spanish Renaissance. But inside, the building was startlingly modern. The lobby was a cavernous space filled with the looming hulks of Tyrannosaurus

skeletons in predatory poses and topped by room-sized panels of glassed-in skylights. Off to the right, a sign hanging by a column shaped like a marble corkscrew identified the area ahead as the *Hall of Gems*.

The atmosphere in here smelled as tinder-dry as the outside for a simple reason: it was the exact same air. A second, taped-off section marked off most of the floor at the end of the hall. Scattered across the floor were shards of glass, some as long as my forearm. Overhead, the Devil's Wind whistled through the shattered skylight. Dust motes swirled like swarms of exotic insects in the ambient exhibit lights as well as the hand-held flashlights of the dozen or so cops that surrounded the area.

I set my jaw and walked towards all the commotion. Again, the guys in blue just couldn't help but crawl all over a crime scene, scuffing or blotting out the marks I needed to do my work. Not for the first time, I grumbled to myself: *Whatever happened to professional courtesy?*

The hallway opened into a large rotunda. The huge space was taken up along the edges by glass cases full of mineral specimens that gleamed softly as I passed. Now my nose picked up something odd. Something familiar. The barest trace of something earthy, musky. *Animal* crossed my mind, and I filed it away as I tried to figure out a source.

A camera flashed from inside the taped-off area. Before I could get close enough to see who was working it, I heard two raised voices over the general bustle of the room. Men's voices, and if they weren't quite loud enough to be arguing, they were certainly doing more than simply discussing the latest Lakers' game.

Alanzo Esteban's face came into view as I made my way between the tape boundary and a display case full of mica chips. His stubble-friendly face was redder than normal, as if he were tamping down strong emotions. We'd been trying to make a relationship work beyond the 'dinner, movie, and kissing' stage, but between his work schedule and my commitment to not getting killed while helping my friends over in Andeluvia, it was still touch-and-go. And a lot less

‘touch’ than I’d have liked, to be perfectly honest.

I realized that the voice I’d heard on the cop’s radio belonged to Lieutenant Luis Ollivar. A tall, beefy slab of a man, most of his muscle had migrated south and morphed into a paunch that made his uniform bulge. For that reason, a lot of people called him ‘Ollie’, but never to his face. His complexion reminded me of sun-burnt coffee beans and his narrow-set eyes hinted at a barely concealed mean streak.

To make things even better, he was a staunch ally of Deputy Chief McClatchy. So much so that I’d once heard Shelly wonder where Bob stuck his hand to work Ollie’s mouth. Unkind, but I’d heard similar things from beat cops in much more graphic detail.

Ollivar caught sight of me just before Esteban did. He let out a piggish snort, greeting me in a polite tone I didn’t buy for a second.

“Glad you could make it, Chrissie. Hope I didn’t ruin your beauty sleep.”

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” I replied, looking over at Esteban. “I’m surprised to see you, Detective. Aren’t you still working Homicide?”

That got a grunt from the Lieutenant. “That’s just what I said. Everything in this place has already been dead for millions of years, so why butt in?”

“I live three blocks from here,” Esteban explained. “I got off shift and was pulling into my driveway when the call came in. I just happened to be the first officer on scene.”

I nodded. It made sense. “So…no homicide to look into, then?”

“Just a burglary,” Ollivar replied, with a certain relish. “Nothing that should tax the mind of an investigator as good as you. Or so I hear.”

I declined to comment as he went on. What was Ollie building up to?

“Turns out, it’s not the missing exhibits that are the most interesting. The custodian here stumbled on the theft while it was in progress. He’s been babbling about it nonstop.”

“What happened must’ve scared him, whatever it was.”

“Or the witness in question has been out sniffing glue on his work

break."

"Lieutenant," Esteban said, shaking his head in disapproval. Ollie ignored him.

"I'd go for the glue explanation, myself. He says that he saw a monster in here."

Okay, that one stopped me. Right in my tracks.

"He saw…a monster?"

"Yeah. Something that was half lion, half eagle."

I traded a nervous glance with Esteban.

Ollivar caught it, his expression going greasy-smug. I didn't like the man, but I had to remind myself to watch out around him. He wasn't an office-bound bureaucrat like McClatchy, even if he did back his boss up without question. And Ollie wasn't a fool. He noticed things.

"So," he said, his voice dripping sarcasm, "you two actually believe this story."

Esteban's face went poker-straight. That was one talent I'd never mastered, so I simply laughed, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"Yeah…that would be a stretch. The only winged lions I've ever seen were made of stone. I have no idea what to make of the witness' statement."

Ollie's frown turned his forehead into one giant brown crease.

"That's funny," he said. "Because that's why I asked specifically for you."

And Lieutenant Ollivar of the LAPD held up a gigantic white feather. One that could only have come from an Andeluvian griffin.

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Chapter Two

Only one thing saved me: my knee-jerk reaction from years of working crime scenes.

"Lieutenant, have you gone insane?" My voice actually cracked on the last syllable in outrage. "You're *contaminating my evidence*!"

Ollivar's condescending I-have-you-now look sank without a trace.

"What do you – I mean, I didn't intend to–"

"What you intended doesn't mean a damn," I said, as I set my case down and dug for a sample bag and a set of forceps. I pulled them out, keeping up the patter. Ollie had scored one on Team Dayna, and I wanted him off his game. "Do you understand what 'DNA contamination' means? How about 'mistrial' or 'botched case'? I'm just about ready to report you to my superiors for your sloppy – maybe I should say incompetent – handling of this crime scene!"

Ollivar's face took on a gray cast. His expression was glum as I plucked the feather from his fingertips with the forceps and stuck it in the bag. Esteban steadfastly looked in another direction until the Lieutenant spoke up again.

"So…do either of you think the witness is telling the truth?"

I let out a breath. At least now I was in control again. "I think he's telling it as he believes it. He's obviously seen *something*. As a matter of fact, I'm not surprised that he saw this particular kind of monster."

"You're not?"

"No. He's been primed to see one." I glanced at Esteban, hoping he'd pick up on my lead. "At least, that's what I was thinking when you first mentioned a lion-eagle thing. Detective, what was that movie called? The flick that came out recently."

Esteban blinked, but he figured out where I was going. "Eh? Oh, the one about griffins. Yeah, that would make sense. Everyone was talking about that for a while, they even had a live-action show down at Grauman's."

Ollivar scratched his head. "How come I never saw it?"

“Bombed at the box office. Lasted a week. I tried to get Dayna to come with me to see it, but I think we’ll have to wait till they put it online or something.”

I shot Esteban a sharp glance at that last bit, but Ollivar apparently bought the line we were peddling.

“Well, even if the witness is hallucinating because of a movie he saw, maybe you can tell me what kind of hoax we’re looking at here. Because someone went to an awful lot of trouble to make it look like a sizable creature broke in here. It’s ridiculous! Probably why McClatchy had me throw it to you.”

That surprised me. “Bob’s the one who pulled me into this?”

“Yeah.” Ollivar’s voice got back a measure of the smugness he’d started off with. “He thinks it’s a shit case that’ll tie someone up in knots. So, he told me that you were a perfect match for it.”

I grimaced. “Great. Your boss is a piece of work, you know that?”

“That’s interesting to know. My boss says the same about you.”

The Lieutenant hadn’t raised his voice, hadn’t sounded threatening at all. But the hairs on the back of my neck and all the way down my arms stood on end. I forced myself to keep an even tone as I leaned in to make my point. Ollivar was a hell of a lot bigger than I was, but then I was used to that when dealing with cops.

“If you or McClatchy have anything to say to me, then why don’t you tell me to my face?”

“I don’t think either of us has much to talk about with you, Chrissie. Not with the things you’re known for.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone knows that you pulled a fast one to get the Deputy Chief hauled back into sensitivity training. You were the one they were going to fire or keep on probation. Instead, presto! You walk out smelling like a rose, and McClatchy’s the skunk. It’s given you quite the reputation.”

“Dayna…” Esteban said, trying to warn me.

I ignored him as completely as Ollivar had before. The earlier chill I’d felt had faded away, to be replaced by searing heat.

“Oh, I have a ‘reputation’ now? Just for trying to keep my job

when some paper-pushing hack wants to deep-six me?"

Ollivar snorted. "Back in my old neighborhood, you're what we call *una trepa*. Oh, you act so innocent, it's like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. But you'll stick anyone in the back with a rusty shank if they so much as look at you cross-eyed."

"In the back?" I sputtered. "You'd be lucky if I didn't stick it somewhere the sun didn't–"

Esteban's voice cut me off like the crack of a whip. "Dayna!"

I glared at both men for a second. Suddenly, I realized that Ollivar, even after I'd knocked him back on his heels, had done to me what I'd done to McClatchy. He'd gotten me flaming mad. And then egged me on to get me to say something he could use to hang me.

This wasn't going to get any better if I stayed. So, I grabbed my case, turned on my heel, and strode away before the toe end of my stompy boots got lodged in someone's ass. Behind me, Esteban and Ollivar went back to their heated discussion. Probably more about me than the case sitting in front of us.

I took a breath to clear my head. Yeah, there was a mystery here, one that possibly included a member of a uniquely Andeluvian species. And that had to take priority over penny-ante work politics. Embracing that newly-found sense of discipline, I found a spot about halfway along the yellow tape line to better survey the crime scene.

Since the 'Hall of Gems' didn't have any giant dinosaur skeletons or hanging banners to display, the room as a whole was a four-story high cylinder of open space. Three rectangular skylights ran the length of the ceiling, though the middle one had been almost completely shattered. A low moan of dry air whistled through the jagged edges of the giant opening.

I looked away from the skylight, taking stock of the ground-level surroundings. Hallways opened at either end, leading to other parts of the museum. Shattered glass covered great swathes of the floor behind the yellow tape border. Various exhibits on the history of gemology and their display cases lay scattered about, knocked over as if by a heavy weight or a gale-force wind.

Directly across from where I stood, about eighty feet away, the

metallic mouth of a large vault gaped open. The battered vault door lay nearby. Even in the museum's dull green-white emergency lighting, the twisted remains of the steel hinges glinted back at me. Definitely not a break-in done with a welding torch.

Something had *torn* the door off by brute force.

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Chapter Three

"Dayna! Hey, over here!"

The voice was familiar, but it didn't sound like Esteban or Ollivar. A hand waved at me from around yet another display case, so I went on over. For the first time since I'd arrived on scene, I smiled. At last, an ally of sorts.

Hector Reyes was the best crime scene photographer and evidence examiner I'd worked with to date. He stood in his usual pose, a wide-hipped stance that called attention to his exquisitely tooled Chihuahuan leather belt. Various bits of gear dangled from said belt, all to service the big black camera that seemed permanently attached to his right hand. His free left hand made graceful gestures in the air as he engaged in rapid-fire Spanish with a shorter, older man in a janitor's uniform. I waited as the conversation wound down and Hector patted his companion sympathetically on the shoulder.

"This is all we needed," he said, with a shake of his head. "We have a real can of worms here. It's *chueco*, hundred percent pure *chueco*."

I nodded agreement. I'd heard both Hector and Alanzo use the term. Depending on the situation, it either meant that a person was crooked, or a situation was completely screwed up. The latter seemed the more likely meaning this time.

"Sounds like the time you photographed the blood spatters around that body for me," I said, recalling the very case that had yanked me bodily into Andeluvia. "Remember the 'Connor McCloud' case? That one was the definition of chueco."

He snapped his fingers. "Yeah, I do. You ever I.D. that body?"

"Not really," I hedged. "Shelly Richardson's put it in the cold case files."

"Figures. Hope we do better this time." He turned, putting his arm around the shorter man. "I'd like you to meet our witness, Tomás. He's also my cousin. Well, second cousin twice removed on my mom's

side."

Tomás nodded to me politely, but didn't add anything. He was an older man, small and thin but wire-tough. His eyes were fever-bright and his hands quivered, but it wasn't from age or drugs. He turned back to Hector, shook his head, and made a hands-up gesture that easily crossed the language barrier: *enough*. His cousin nodded and Tomás shuffled from the room as fast as his legs would take him.

I gave Hector a puzzled look. "What was that about?"

"He's feeling a bit 'stretched', so he decided to go home and take a nap."

"Stretched?"

"Tomás is still feeling jumpy from the 'event' that broke this skylight into a million pieces. He's tired from working the graveyard and then telling the same damn story to six different cops. And he's more than a little pissed off at being called *loco*, a drug addict, and worse."

I could understand that last bit a lot more than Hector could know. "So what did he see?"

"He was setting up to sweep the Hall of Gems at a quarter to four. Then out of nowhere, he hears a huge bang. Something big crashes in from the roof. He thought maybe a plane had fallen out of the sky or something, at least until he heard a cry."

"A cry? Someone called out?"

"Or some*thing*. Tomás said it sounded like a huge hawk or eagle. Then a beat of wings and a glimpse of something furry flying through the air. It was all too fast for him to really make things out, but he says it was part lion, part bird." Hector paused, adding, "Dayna, I know this sounds ridiculous. But I know Tomás, he's as straight-arrow as they come. He doesn't do drugs, sniff aerosol cans, or whatever that idiot Ollivar is saying. My cousin is solid."

"I'm not dismissing anything out of hand, believe me. What else did he see?"

"Whatever it was, it got close enough to him so that all he saw was a blur of colors. White, gold, and green."

"Green? You're sure?"

“I asked him twice, he says he saw the color green. At least, until whatever it was smacked into him, knocked him senseless. He woke up to find the alarms ringing, the place a shambles, and that vault door torn off and tossed into the room like it weighed nothing.”

I didn’t say anything at first, but my own emotions were getting a little ‘stretched’. As a matter of fact, I was really, really worried. Fayleene and centaurs had made it through to my world before. Perhaps another species had found a way through.

“You set to walk on some glass?” Hector asked.

In answer, I lifted one leg, showing off the thick sole of my oh-so-attractive stompy boot.

“Looks good,” he pronounced, and lifted the yellow tape barrier to duck underneath.

I followed suit. The crunching noises from moving over the BB-sized granules of glass made it sound like we were tramping around a mountain of puffed rice cereal. The sound shifted to the nerve-tingling jangle of glass shards grinding away at each other as we moved directly into the breakage zone.

Hector wasn’t a fully licensed analyst like myself, but he’d been around hundreds of crime scenes. His ability to read patterns in everything from blood splatters to glass fractures was even better than mine. He led me out to the center of the room, directly under the shattered skylight, and spread his arms as if to encompass the scene.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s hear your observations. See if they match up with mine.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed. We’d done this before on the odd occasion that one of us was puzzled as to a particular pattern. Sometimes we were able to make a breakthrough this way. “First off, a skylight has to use tempered or laminated glass. The breakage I’m seeing has some long shards. Tempered glass won’t do that – it explodes into little cubes. So I’m guessing this is laminated glass, held together with Grade-C polyvinyl butyral.”

“Grade A, actually.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. I didn’t figure it out on my own, I asked Tomás. Those

are thirty-foot long window slabs up there, they needed the strongest glass around."

It made sense. Laminated glass was held together by a thin sheet of polyvinyl, sandwiched between an upper and lower pane. That made it tougher and more likely to stick together after breaking. Otherwise, Hector wouldn't have led me under the break without better headgear. Sheets of falling glass made very efficient guillotines.

"Second," I continued, "we've got a twenty-foot hole, and relatively long glass shards here on the ground. The laminate had a chance to spread the weight of impact before the pane gave way. That means it's not a small, high-velocity object that punched its way through. Not unless they're making rifle bullets in a lot larger, slower calibers these days."

"You're seeing what I'm seeing, then. Something huge hit that pane at sub-terminal velocity. And that is what boggles my mind. If the unknown object wasn't falling like a boulder dropped from a sky crane, then…could it have been under a controlled descent?"

"You think whatever-it-was *flew* through the window, instead of *falling* through it."

"That's the only conclusion that makes any sense! Look at this." Hector turned his camera so that I could look at the digital screen on the back. I saw an image of a dark surface, pitted with tiny bright dots. "That's a shot I took of a cork board hung on the wall section under the break. It's studded with small glass shards that entered at a near-horizontal angle."

"So they didn't fall onto the board. Or bounce there after hitting the floor."

"Unlikely. They must have been picked up and flung against the board by vortex turbulence. A small helicopter descending through the break at power could generate one strong enough."

Or a griffin's wings as it hovered in place, I thought.

"Let's follow that line of thinking," I said aloud. "They do make drone aircraft now. Some are small enough to fit through a skylight, maybe weigh enough to make that hole. Some even have rotors which allow them to hover in place."

“Yeah, perhaps. And I suppose whoever it was kitted out their drone aircraft to look like a lion. Or a giant eagle. Maybe even Big Bird from Sesame Street.”

“And even then,” I finished, “how could you equip the drone to wrench open a foot-thick vault door?”

“Ah, now that’s where things get interesting,” Hector said with a flourish. “It’s not *really* a vault door.”

“It’s not?” I bit my lip in thought.

Curiouser and curiouser, as someone from Wonderland might have said.

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Chapter Four

“We’re not talking about a real vault door,” Hector explained, as he motioned for me to follow him. “It’s just a plain metal piece that was built mostly for show, back when Eisenhower was president. They keep it propped open when the museum’s open so people can get the feeling that they’re looking at something valuable.”

We passed the broken door where it lay atop a small mound of glass shards. A quadruple set of short grooves or gouges along the side made me think of gripping talons. Hector stopped, and I looked over his shoulder. The inside of the ‘vault’ had been a display room filled with tables set inside glass cases. The cases were shattered, the contents long gone.

I considered that. “So it was propped open last night?”

“No, they shut it, and Tomás says he saw the closing crew lock it when he checked in. It still doesn’t help answer anything, though. The door isn’t strong by bank vault standards, but it still had a heavy deadbolt and steel hinges. A human being wouldn’t be able to bust it open.”

In my mind, I envisioned my friend Grimshaw as he tore off the entire top half of a pickup’s metal camper shell. I only had a moment to contemplate the idea. My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of multiple footsteps at the far end of the room.

A squad of men in the same unmarked black suits had entered the hall, but they didn’t cross the tape border. Instead, they formed a perimeter of their own around a section of the museum exhibit still draped in white drop cloths. More men wheeled in a safe mounted on sets of heavy metal casters. A pair of the men remained with the safe while the others entered the inner part of the exhibit, out of sight.

“What in the world is going on over there?” I asked Hector.

“Ollivar didn’t tell you?”

“He was too busy trying to win a pissing contest with me.”

“Figures. If it makes you feel any better, I’d have bet on you.”

I bit my lip, suppressing a grin. “Thanks, Hector.”

“The guys in black are a private security firm. According to Tomás, the museum was set to open a brand new exhibit tomorrow morning: the Montana ‘Cornflower’ Sapphires. Worth millions, so they were kept in the new vault across the way. Given what’s happened, they’re sitting on it like a flock of mother hens.”

“Did Tomás tell you what was in this older vault?”

“No, but I found a description of the contents in a museum guidebook. It held one of the museum’s vintage collections.”

“A collection of diamonds? Rubies, maybe?”

Hector shook his head. “Quartz. The museum’s had a flawless set of clear quartz crystals from Brazil displayed here since the Sixties. Quite a rare find, from what the museum guide says. A completely pure variant of crystal with no inclusions, called ‘phantom’ quartz.”

“You said it was rare. Rare enough to be worth stealing?”

“I suppose. If you’re someone who gets a hard-on from reading gemology journals. The entire set’s supposed to be worth ten, eleven thousand dollars. That’s enough to categorize it as grand theft, at least.”

“But with the sapphire exhibit in the same hall…”

“That’s right. Someone passed up the chance to steal million-dollar sapphires for some crystals worth chump change by comparison.”

Now my mind was awhirl with confusion. McClatchy had picked the right case for Ollivar to pin on me, that much was sure. And in the back of my mind was another worry: the ultimate purpose of the theft. A being from Andeluvia might have use for those crystals that no one from this world could conceive of. Not for the first time tonight, I wished that I had Galen’s wizardly counsel at my side.

“All right,” I sighed. “We’re getting wrapped around the axle here. Let’s put aside possible motive for the moment and just focus on evidence collection. Have you finished taking pictures of the entire scene yet?”

He grimaced. “I thought I had. But I had to switch to some different lenses and start over a few minutes ago. The lights here are

playing havoc with my photos."

"It's really important, Hector."

"Don't worry, I'll have a full set ready for you to look over." He stepped away, then looked back over his shoulder. "What about you? What are you thinking of doing?"

"I'll start with a visual sweep of the vault and this door on my own. Maybe I'll stumble on some metal shard or piece of fiber that can prove our 'drone aircraft' theory."

Reyes carefully crunched his way through the glass as I started at the vault entrance. I began with the metallic door frame, looking for the telltale marks of jackhammers, hints of explosives, fibers or cutting tools. But I knew what I was really looking for.

The 'clunk' of wood on metal made me look up. The private security team had brought out a display board festooned with perfectly cut sapphires. The stones glittered like little lavender flowers as the men on the team slipped the board carefully into the waiting safe.

A *chuff* as the safe's door closed, followed by the *clack-clack* of tumblers.

I forced my attention back to the problem at hand. I was looking for marks of talons, traces of pinfeather. Yes, I knew that it was bad form to do a sweep with a single conclusion already formed and in place. Starting with the end in mind could cause even the sharpest investigator to miss otherwise important details. But I couldn't shake it. The one ability of mine I trusted more than any other was my sense of smell. And that tiny trace of animal musk in the hall when I first walked in told me one unmistakable truth.

Whatever else was true, a *griffin* had certainly burgled the Natural History Museum to steal a bunch of near-worthless crystals.

What the hell was going on here?

I put the thought out of my mind as I began my sweep at the top of the vault door. At slightly higher than shoulder height I found a set of four matching indentations on each side, conical thrust and compression marks against the hard steel edges of the door frame. Based on the marks, the thrusting force came from the outside in. I

stopped and considered my options.

My knowledge of griffins stemmed almost completely from being around my friend Grimshaw. Medieval heraldry commonly showed griffins as having full eagle half-bodies, with hawk-like talons for forepaws. In Andeluvia, the griffins were more leonine. Only stern eagle faces and wings displayed their avian side.

Shaw's forepaws had five talons, like a large cat. Unlike earthly felines, he also had a semi-opposable thumb. Without a fully opposable thumb and sporting thick, fur-clad fingers, it would be very difficult for Shaw to pick up a coffee mug and nearly impossible to type on a keyboard. That said, I'd seen him work doorknobs, car horn buttons, and pick up large to medium-size objects with relative ease.

So, it was certainly possible for a griffin to grab hold of the vault door around the edges. Of course, lion strength or no, it would be difficult to jam a griffin's fingers into the small opening around the frame without injury. But I'd also seen griffins from Andeluvia's Air Cavalry wear all sorts of armor. And if a griffin could wear Andeluvian-crafted gauntlets…

I considered for a moment before diving back into my crime-scene case for some additional gear. I started with a new sample bag and a smaller set of forceps. Next, I pulled out a goggle strap with magnifying lenses and put that on. Finally, I found a disposable face mask and slipped the loops over my ears.

You learn a lot about crime scene analysis work in the classroom and laboratory, sure. But only on-the-job experience teaches you how to avoid the little 'gotchas' that can trip you up. I was looking for something really small, either a tiny metal shaving or a piece of feather. The last thing I wanted when I was closing in for the kill with my forceps was for the object to get blown away by my breath, hence the face mask.

My hunch paid off. A couple of minutes of carefully going over each indentation in the door frame with the magnifiers turned up something small but significant: a thin flake of metal. I bagged it and mentally bet myself that it would turn out to be the same mixture of iron and carbon as 'blister steel'. Said steel was only manufactured in

the High Middle Ages.

Or in a fantasy world complete with kings, wizards, talking deer, and griffins.

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Chapter Five

I looked over the shattered remains of the rest of the room and wondered if I should get the filtered vacuum unit from the van to find traces of fur or feather. But before I could make that decision, I heard someone crunching their way towards me over the mounds of broken glass outside the vault room. Then a good-natured chuckle.

"Sorry, Dayna," Esteban said as I turned to face him. "Between the suit, the mask, and those goggles…you look like one of the bounty hunters from *Star Wars*."

I pulled off the magnifiers and the mask with crisp *snaps* of elastic.

"Well, crime scene gear isn't meant for a model's catwalk." That came out more sharp-sounding than I intended. "Speaking of which, please don't touch anything. I'm in the middle of an evidence sweep."

He backed off a little from the vault opening, making sure to keep his hands away from all surfaces. I put my forceps aside and stepped out next to him as he cleared his throat and began again.

"I just spoke with the museum's director. They'll be sending their security camera tapes to the LAPD. I'll make sure your office gets a copy."

"Good. Since you already know who to talk to, ask them to pull the building's air filters. Tell them to put each filter in a clean plastic bag and send it direct to the OME."

He gave me a puzzled look. "But…why? You planning to have the building inspected for mold or something?"

"Not mold. Hair. Fur, to be more specific. Feathers, or pieces of feathers."

Esteban had a toe-curlingly cute face that shone like a new copper penny when he smiled his gap-toothed grin at me. But lurking just below that kind surface was a flint-hard layer I'd seen a couple of times. I wasn't naïve about it. No one made it to a senior position in the Homicide Division by being a milquetoast, yet it still unnerved me when that steely hardness came out. Like now.

“You think that this is some monster. From that other world.” He said it flatly, as a statement of fact.

“I don’t think of griffins as monsters, but otherwise, yes.”

“I’ve only met one griffin. He threated to ‘clout’ me.”

“Yeah, he’s known to do that sometimes,” I said, trying to lighten things up. “It means he likes you.”

Esteban wasn’t having it. His voice stayed flat.

“So that means you’ll have to go back there again. To Andeluvia.”

“It’s possible. Likely, even.” I felt my cheeks flush. I didn’t want to tell a lie, but after all that had happened this morning, I didn’t think this was the right time to spring news on a man who I wanted to keep on my good side.

I hadn’t told Esteban the full truth of what had been going on. Thanks to McClatchy’s meddling, I’d barely been able to do my job for the past month-and-a-half. So, I’d taken advantage of that fact to visit Andeluvia on a more regular basis.

Last week, before I wrangled my way back into field work by taking the night shift, I requested a change to part-time status. Esteban had been so busy with his own work that we hadn’t seen nearly as much of each other as I’d have liked, and I’d hesitated to tell him about my request. I knew he wouldn’t like it. And true to Dayna Chrissie form, I felt both ashamed and defensive about the entire thing.

“Likely? I’d say it’s a guarantee. You like that place, that world. More than this one.” He half-turned away from me and crossed his arms. “More than what I can offer, I can guess that right off.”

The guilty-feeling and defensive side of me fought each other for a moment. The defensive side of me won out. “Haven’t we had this discussion before? I need to go where I’m needed.”

“What if I told you that I was the one who needed you?”

“That’s…” I pulled off my glove and used my bare hand to pinch above the bridge of my nose. I wasn’t sure if it was the emotional turmoil or the early hour wake-up call, but my head was starting to throb. “That’s different. And I don’t know how much you really need me. Not after our last date.”

An irritated grumble. “You’re still going to throw that in my face, are you?”

“Throw it in…Alanzo, we’d already decided that we were going to–” I caught myself and bit my tongue. No telling how well sound echoed in this huge oval room. “I mean, you had me practically out of my clothes when the damn phone rang!”

In truth, he’d had me less than ten seconds from jamming my thumbs in my panties and pulling them down on my own. It had started out with me bringing take-out from a Thai place down the street from where he lived. Innocent enough, until some necking and kissing had taken us around at least two of three bases and a slide into home plate was definitely in the works.

And then, the damned phone call had come in. The big break in his murder case. It had resulted in a shoot-out that ended with the bad guy in custody. It could just as well have ended with Esteban in a body bag. I felt bad for even bringing it up. But call it the early morning hours, the frustration of missing out on some choice lovemaking, topped off with the cherry on the sundae of emotions: the guilt over not coming clean over my visits to Andeluvia. I couldn’t excuse myself. I just couldn’t.

But right then I couldn’t rein my emotions in, either.

“What did you expect me to do, Dayna?” he gritted. “Shut off my phone? Pass on the chance to stop a Grade-A psychopath – someone who could have killed again?”

“No! But I didn’t know you were on duty! You didn’t tell me! And then, somewhere between the egg rolls and the pad thai noodles, what happened? You just about charmed me out of my pants – only to leave me high and dry.”

“Fine. You’re in the right, as always, and I’m in the wrong. Is that what you want to hear?”

“How about a simple ‘I’m sorry, Dayna.’ Or is that too much to ask? Besides, we hardly see each other enough to qualify this as a relationship.”

“Look, the Lieutenant’s got me working double duty. It’s rough, I know. But he thinks that with my talent, I’m next in line for his spot

when he moves up. And he will."

"This is about Ollivar now, then? Well, that's just *great*. Back there, when he tried to piss me off? You let drop a hint that you and I are dating."

"He already knows we're dating, Dayna. He's known since I started seeing you."

For some reason that made me even madder. "Oh, I guess I'm worth some locker-room talk, then? Real smooth way to get on my good side, Alanzo."

"No," he sighed. "Not locker-room talk. I've known Luis for five or six years now. We've worked together a lot. He's had me over for barbeques. I've been to his daughter's *quinceañera*. He can be sharp-tongued, sure, but I don't just think of him as my boss. I think of him as a friend."

A friend, and a good one, I realized. Especially if Esteban had been invited to the fifteenth birthday celebration of Ollivar's kid. That rankled me more than I thought it would.

"I'm not so keen on your taste in friends, then. He's part of McClatchy's crowd. I'm not sure I like him around you."

Esteban's hazel eyes bored into me for a moment. He lowered his voice and spoke in a gentler tone. "Are we back in high school, Dayna? You don't like one of my friends, so I better not hang out with them?"

"You know about the problems I'm having with McClatchy."

"Yes, I do. Believe me. But those problems are between you and him. Not between Ollivar and me. Luis may have stirred you up a bit, but he won't go further than that." Esteban uncrossed his arms, then touched me gently on the shoulder, bringing me around to face him. "He knows you have your own friends in the department. And I'm one of them. If you'll have me."

I could say that Esteban made me stop in my tracks there, but that wouldn't be quite right. More like melted me. Made my anger drip away. I was tired, and that had brought the foolishness out in me.

"I'll have you." I took his hand, squeezing gently. "I was out of line there, wasn't I?"

Esteban lifted his other hand and brought his index finger and thumb within a half-inch of each other.

"So was I," he admitted. "And yes, I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have gotten you all worked up when I knew that I could be called away at any moment. That was wrong, and I'm sorry."

I let out a breath. I did care about Alanzo, even if the bond we had was new, raw, and already stretched by my time in the other world and his schedule. And when it came to his relationship with the Lieutenant, I had to remember something my mother had once told me and my sister: that boyfriends and lovers never came custom tailored. Sometimes, if you truly cared for someone, you had to accept things about them you weren't all that happy about.

"Now that we've cleared the air a bit," Esteban continued, "You and I *will* have to keep an eye on Ollivar. You're right, he's one of McClatchy's boys. And McClatchy's in the running to become the next Chief of the LAPD."

"Don't remind me," I groaned.

"Well, you might expect more oddball assignments like this. And Luis might put one more roadblock in your path. If you want to keep your sidearm, you're going to have to recertify before the end of the month. Ollivar's got a lot of pull in the firearms training department."

I grimaced. Yes, I needed to keep my gun. My time in Andeluvia had convinced me that there were too many things in that world outside my weight class.

"Ouch. Sounds like I need to carve out some more time from my schedule to handle that as well."

"Then maybe we can make lemonade from our lemons," Esteban said, and the attractive glint came back into his smile. "Meet me this Friday for practice on the range? How about putting a couple hours after noontime to good use?"

"I'll be there. Keeping my sidearm has become a much higher priority as of late."

"So it's settled. You will be going back to…that other place."

I looked back at where I'd set down my aluminum case. Inside lay that giant white feather, almost mocking me with what it stood for.

I had questions to ask. None of which could be answered in this world.

“Yes,” I said plainly. “I’m going.”

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Chapter Six

I'd swabbed the griffin feather and turned the samples over to the labs back at the Office of the Medical Examiner, but I was cultivating a bunch more ruffled feathers at the moment. I was getting impatient, and that was the one thing I did not need to be right now.

For the first time in almost three months, I'd managed to get access to the Parliament building – a sort of cross between a Greek-style theatre and a high-roofed barn. Rows of drafting tables ran the circumference of the room, manned by a legion of horn-tufted owls seated atop iron bar perches set behind the tables. Bright yellow eyes threw me curious glances, though most of their attention was reserved for the scribbling of laws or spending bills on rolls of parchment. The air was charged with the strange but heady scent of feathers, old parchment, and freshly baked pastry.

Xandra, the first Parliamentarian I'd ever met, perched on a lower bar before me so that we could converse more easily. Well, at least it was easier to look her in the eyes. Andeluvian owls were giants compared with the Great Horned Owls from rural Illinois, as they stood more than three feet tall and sported wicked-looking black talons. But their uniqueness – at least for this world – lay in their mode of speaking.

"So regretful it is, so regretful," Xandra said, with a shake of her tufted head. "When those we wish to meet are otherwise occupied. It makes one wish for other places, other ways one can busy oneself more productively."

Xandra had a prim and proper voice that reminded me of a gentle schoolmarm. Like the other owls, she tended to talk 'around' a subject in the most circuitous ways possible. And to top off that linguistic sundae, they also assiduously avoided using the word 'I'. It forced me to engage an extra handful of circuits to mentally translate whatever they were saying.

So regretful it is when those we wish to meet are otherwise occupied.

To me, that sounded a lot like bureaucrat-speak for 'We're sorry, the party you want to reach is currently on another line.' *It makes one wish for other places, other ways one can busy oneself more productively.*

In other words: Scram, kid. Go off somewhere else and keep yourself busy.

Like hell I'd be doing that. Aside from my natural stubbornness, I needed to press my case. I had to. I wanted to speak with Thea, the 'Albess', a sort of combination Head of Parliament and Holy Figure. She was kind enough, and had been supportive of my work in bringing King Benedict's murderer to justice. But she'd also sunk out of public view right as she'd given me the clue to solving who had assassinated a Captain of Andeluvia's Royal Air Cavalry. I wanted to find out what else she knew.

So, I gritted my teeth and did my best attempt to speak Parliament-ese.

"One realizes that those such as the Albess always have days piled high with platters full of tasks," I said reasonably. "Yet surely one as exalted as she could spare a moment for she-of-another-world, one who has traveled so far to see her and hear her wisdom."

My invocation of the title that Xandra herself had given me on my first meeting failed to impress in the slightest. And yet I heard a hint of curiosity in her voice when she next spoke.

"Platters of the day are piled high, indeed!" She let out a 'hoo!' adding, "Certainly, one such as the Albess is wise beyond measure. Yet there are others who have this quality in small but measureable amounts. Could one such as these be of such use to you?"

Inwardly, I groaned. *There are others who have this quality in small amounts. Could one such as these be of such use to you?* That is, you're not getting to see Thea, so how about seeing someone else to talk about whatever it is you want? Even phrased politely, I was still getting the stonewall treatment.

But I couldn't just talk with any old owl. Beyond Thea, I didn't know who I could trust. I was pretty sure that the Albess suspected that her movements and contacts with me were being watched. She'd supported me mostly under the table, not openly. What's more, the

one and only time she'd spoken to me directly, she'd couched her advice in a riddle.

"One foresees a time that this could be helpful," I began, then decided to lean a little harder. "But she-from-another-world comes upon the wings of a storm. One that could shake the very rafters of the owls' homes. Fear and danger are what drive me into the wings and counsel of only the wisest and eldest of the Parliament. One cannot leave by the doors she entered until her desire to speak has been quenched."

Maybe I was being a little dramatic. But the fact remained that Thea's lead had put me into contact with a very old, very dangerous type of demon. That 'Old Man of the Mountain' had done two things: set me up to nearly commit a murder of my own, and put me on notice that there were powers on the move behind the scenes. Ones that had been defeated in a long-forgotten war. Ones that even now could be looking for vengeance.

Xandra's head tufts twitched a couple of times before she answered.

"One feels that the rafters that span the heights above us are yet safe and secure. Only chicks and old hens jump and quail at shadows. And one must point out, doors work both to admit and dismiss our concerns."

If I had any problems interpreting *that*, a pair of the largest owls I'd seen yet landed on perches next to me. One big bruiser of a bird flexed a dark talon the size of my index finger and dragged it against the steel bar he perched upon. A menacing *scree* echoed in the chamber.

I didn't like it, but even Dayna Chrissie knows when an argument isn't getting anywhere.

"She-from-another-world sees that doors do operate both ways, indeed. Yet my need shall not go away, but shall redouble. This shall not be the last time we speak on this subject."

"One looks forward to such tidings," Xandra said, sounding surprisingly sincere about it.

With that, I turned and left the Parliamentarians to their

scribbling.

* * *

I pushed through the heavy iron-banded door that led into what I thought of as the 'turret room' in one of the palace's corner towers. It was a spacious circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling that made up the inside of the dunce cap tower. The room came with a wooden table, a fully kitted out hearth, a set of tapestries to keep down the worst of the drafts, and a pair of windows that looked out over a swath of the palace's open courtyard.

At night, one could close the windows with a set of wooden shutters that looked as if they could plug portholes on a battleship. Light came either from the lit hearth or from a set of beeswax candles hung from a metal circlet above the table. Spent wax hung from the circlet like yellow stalactites, but the sockets had been empty for a long while. Without being asked, Galen would usually set a half-dozen balls of 'werelight' along the circuit, which gave off better illumination than the candles ever could.

The turret room wasn't 'assigned' to anyone, as best as I could tell. However, ever since I'd used the place to both teach my friends board games and to plot strategy with a fayleene, a pooka, a centaur, and a griffin, word had sort of gotten around the court that I'd laid claim to it.

Galen and Shaw were both at the huge center table as I entered the room. The Wizard wore his usual wine-colored cloth jacket, one that complimented the dark hair and brooding looks. It still had me mentally casting him in *Wuthering Heights*. He raised a silver tankard topped with a sudsy head to his lips as his companion let out his uniquely leonine laugh.

Shaw's tawny fur gleamed under a cape of ivory-colored feathers as his wings lay furled up against his back. His eagle face appeared stern as always, but merriment danced in his golden eyes. The griffin grasped a tankard of his own; I noted absently that it had no handles, allowing Shaw to curl a lion's paw around the vessel's exterior.

"Dayna, thou hast arrived at a perfect moment!" Shaw said expansively. "The Wizard and I are celebrating a moment most

proud."

I grinned as I sat down on a bench at the table. The griffin's good mood was infectious. "Whatever it was, it must have been special."

"That would be a fair appraisal of the situation," Galen agreed. He pushed a third cup over to me. The froth that made up the head slopped over the side. "In case you are less than familiar with this libation, it is a very good grade of ale. Fashioned from fermented wort of barley."

While the tankard in question fit Shaw and Galen's grip well, I needed two hands to lift my own portion. I swirled the contents, revealing a cloudy brown liquid and a heady, beer-like scent. Tipping it back, I gave it a healthy swig.

The taste was dense, malty, with a hint of apple peel and toasted grain. But it was the texture that got me. Instead of the easy-pour liquid I was familiar with, Andeluvian ale had a curious thickness, as if one were drinking a heavily diluted bowl of porridge. I swallowed and let out a cough.

"Not to your liking?" Galen inquired.

I shook my head as I coughed again. "No, it's actually pretty good. Just caught me off guard there."

"The good stuff always catches thine attention," the griffin chimed in. "'Tis part of its charm, methinks."

"So, what exactly are we celebrating?" I took another cautious sip and felt warmth rush to my face. I wasn't a heavy drinker, but this surprised me. I resolved to find out exactly how much alcohol came in a tankard of Andeluvian ale.

"It has to do with our fayleene brethren," Galen supplied.

I put my drink aside. "Then I really want to hear this."

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Chapter Seven

Ever since the destruction of their forest, the fayleene had made a slow, careful journey across the northern reaches of Fitzwilliam's kingdom to reach their new home in the Grove of the Willows. I'd spent a good portion of my time during my recent visits to Andeluvia helping Liam shepherd the weak or wounded members of his people across the rougher parts of the terrain. My experiences with the fayleene had, until that point, been decidedly mixed. However, during the trek they were unfailingly polite and helpful. I suppose that surviving disaster gave one a great deal more humility.

"Liam is still busy making sure that his people are settling in well at the Grove of the Willows," Galen explained. "Compared to their original forest the grove is warmer and easier to find forage in. Yet, for a time it seemed that they merely traded one hazard for another."

"That sounds ominous. What do you mean?"

The centaur *clacked* one of his hooves on the stone floor in annoyance. "That thrice-damned Lord Behnaz. The man grudgingly gave his consent to let the fayleene dwell on his lands, but he says he lacks the power to control the lawless elements that ride roughshod outside his demesne."

I chose not to comment. Behnaz and I had locked horns more than once before. The only reason he granted the grove to the fayleene had been pressure from his wife. And that same lawlessness he claimed to be unable to prevent had been the justification for King Fitzwilliam springing him from a richly deserved dungeon cell.

Shaw let out a *burp*, which he muffled with one furry paw. "Thus we come to the erstwhile problem: Fayleene poachers."

"Poachers?" My voice jumped a half-octave on that one. "Why would anyone purposely harm a fayleene? They're supposed to be good luck!"

The griffin shrugged. "Doth one expect common sense from a brigand?"

“No market exists for fayleene meat,” Galen put in. “But folk healers and snake-oil vendors imply that their horns could be powdered and turned into phials of luck.”

That made about as much sense to me as the ridiculous rabbit’s feet that some people carried around. But as Shaw has said, logic wasn’t part of the equation here. And a not-so-small part of me was surprised that, at least in this world, snake-oil salesmen really did exist.

“Grimshaw and I got wind of a band who were planning to sneak into the Grove of the Willows and bag a brace of horns.” Galen went on. “We tracked them to just inside the wood’s boundary, and then decided that the time was right to do a little teaching…of the corporal variety.”

“And teach thine adversaries we did!” Shaw cackled. “Thou wouldst have been proud, Dayna. The Wizard tickled their bottoms with lightning whilst I corralled them and beat them into the ground with wing and claw.”

“Our griffin friend here put on an excellent show,” Galen affirmed. “When I made my appearance, I made it clear that I was only barely able to restrain my bestial friend from eating them and sucking out the marrow from their bones.”

“Thy efforts were most effective, Wizard. At least three of the ruffians soiled their breechcloths. None shall return to the woods, I wager.”

And that was good enough for me to laugh and join in a third sip with my friends. I wiped the foam away from my lips and enjoyed the moment while it lasted. I hated to break the mood when it was so chipper, but I really didn’t have a choice.

“I’m glad that you two are here,” I began. “I’m afraid that I have a new case back in Los Angeles, and it’s one that I need help on.”

“Thou hast but to ask,” Shaw dipped his head regally.

“I concur,” Galen agreed.

I outlined the basics of the happenings at the Natural History Museum. Though this time, I saved the best for last. At the end of my tale, I drew out the specimen bag and held it up for both of them to

see.

Galen's breath came out in a hiss. "A…griffin feather? From your home world?"

Shaw shook his head, almost in denial. "Thou must be mistaken, Dayna. Thou must! Only a griffin who has completely fallen from honor would stoop to theft."

"Maybe I am mistaken," I admitted. "Shaw, are you telling me that there has never been a griffin who's fallen from grace, so to speak?"

My friend looked away. "Thy words pry a shameful truth from my beak: there have been griffins who have lost their way in the past. Their deaths were painful, and richly deserved."

Galen finished his ale and set his tankard down on the table with a *clank*. "I remain more concerned about the purpose of this theft. Crystals often have a magical use. And I am puzzled as to the agency behind this creature's appearance in your world. A wizard powerful enough to open a gate there should be known by my guild."

I didn't roll my eyes, but I came close. "You know how I feel about the usefulness of that wizard's guild. They didn't predict Magnus Killsheven's arrival in my world. And they didn't know about the Old Man of the Mountain's ability to transport beings, either."

"Do you believe that we have another wizard or demon on our hands, then?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm willing to bet that who-or-whatever is behind this isn't human. At least, this isn't a being who can change into human form."

That got Shaw's attention. "Pray tell, enlighten us."

"A human – or a human-shaped magical being, at any rate – could have simply teleported into the museum directly. Then, if they had enough magic to transport themselves to my world, I'm sure they could have figured out a way to get through a couple of steel hinges to grab their quarry. Sending in a griffin is a like holding up a neon sign in my world, announcing 'Something strange is going on here'."

Galen stroked his chin in thought. "Say that you are right. Who does that leave, at least among the beings that we know?"

“There is the fayleene princeling, Wyeth,” I suggested. “He claimed that he’d learned how to use fey magic in especially dark ways.”

“True enough. He did claim that he had acquired more power, but it doesn’t necessarily mean he can move between worlds. And he is a being of fey magic. Fey is based on living creatures and their energy. Crystals would imply a different type of magic.”

“Thou speakest true,” Shaw said. “Crystals are naught more than pretty rocks, methinks.”

“Think back to what was stated in the Codex of the *Bellum Draconus*.” Galen cleared his throat as he recited the words. “*And the Creatures of Light placed as many of the Dark Ones as they could into the earth, sealing others inside the great stones that lay athwart the mountains*.”

My heart felt like lead as I let that thought sink in. “Another earth demon, like ‘Rocky’? Now I’m truly worried. That ‘last great war of Andeluvia’…could still be on.”

Shaw let out a snort. “After we smashed their ‘Old Man’? After we vanquished their foul dragon, Sirrahon? I think little of their chances!”

“We neutralized one of the ‘spirit’ stones, but only after much loss. And a lot of help from our pooka friend. As for Sirrahon, we didn’t exactly ‘vanquish’ him. Liam convinced him to leave, that was all. We’d be foolish not to consider–”

A knock at the door stopped my train of thought right in its tracks.

Galen answered for us. “Enter, kind sir.”

To my surprise, the door opened to reveal a tall young man in the robin’s-egg blue outfit of a royal page. He bowed to us courteously, though he didn’t take his eyes off Grimshaw’s massive leonine form.

“Greetings, kind sirs,” he said, in a prissy voice. “I am here to summon Lady Chrissie to court. She is wanted in the throne room.”

Galen and Shaw turned and looked at me speculatively. I shook my head; I didn’t know what was up either. I decided to ask a question of my own. “Who sends this summons?”

“Why, King Fitzwilliam, of course! He wishes to speak with you in

all haste!”

“I’ll come, of course. Did he say on what matter?”

“One such as I is never privy to his Majesty’s thoughts,” the page demurred, though he scrunched his face up in thought as he added, “however, if it is about what he and the other lords were just discussing…it may be about whether you are allowed to remain in Andeluvia. Or not.”

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Chapter Eight

The part of the palace that held Fitzwilliam's throne was about as large as a good-sized ballroom. Even more impressively, it came complete with a set of stone columns decorated with the coils of some stylized reptile and a polished black-and-white marble floor that made all but the softest step echo. At least, when it was empty.

That was hardly the case right now. As a matter of fact, there were enough angry mutters, curses, and shouts to drown me out even if I'd dropped a metal tray full of autopsy tools. Inwardly, I had already started to cringe.

Galen and Shaw had been politely asked to wait just outside, so the only person I had by my side was the page who'd summoned me in the first place. The blue-tinged light from the alcoves we passed on the way up to the throne tinged his pale skin the color of a corpse fresh out of the chiller room.

I could only imagine how ghastly I looked. At least I had a warm tingle radiating from my insides, courtesy of three sips of Andeluvian ale. And based on the comments I was hearing from the lords up ahead, that was the last warmth I was going to be feeling for a while.

King Fitzwilliam, the son of the late Good King Benedict, wore his usual regal garb of a fur-trimmed silvery robe topped off with the golden circlet of his crown. I guessed his age to be mid-thirties, though his shoulder-length blond hair had started going prematurely gray around the temples. His expressions while holding court from the throne typically ranged from mildly amused to profoundly bored. However, for now he wore a bland expression that would've done a poker player justice as he listened to the running dialog around him without comment.

Fitzwilliam's right hand lay on the arm of his throne, fingers drumming. His left foot did a soundless tap in counterpoint. On the whole, the King resembled nothing so much as a twitchy tomcat who

was getting tired of waiting by the mouse hole for something to tear into.

The throne room was set up in what I thought of as 'conference mode'. That meant the court pages, or whoever did the Royal Event Planning, had set up a pair of curved oak tables extending out from either side of the throne itself. According to Galen, this was a tradition from the earliest reign of the kingdom's monarchs. The lords of the Western Reaches sat at the curved table to Fitzwilliam's right, while those from the Eastern Reaches sat in counterpoint on the left. There was also some type of pecking order as to who sat closest to the King which had to do with an arcane mix of seniority, wealth, and power.

All I knew was that the entire setup made whoever was summoned feel like they were being cross-examined by a hostile grand jury. Which, of course, was probably the point. At each table sat around a dozen nobles, each clad in fur or velvet-trimmed outfits that made them look rich – though not as rich as the King. A couple of the attendees were women, but the loudest voices belonged to the men.

I recognized the most obnoxious jibes as coming from the red-faced, potbellied man sitting at Fitzwilliam's right elbow. The recently restored Lord Behnaz didn't seem any worse for wear after his stay in the dungeons. If anything, his baby-food green mantle stretched even tighter over his midsection. His eyes glittered with something close to revulsion as he gazed at me.

The looks I got from the King's immediate left weren't much better. As matter of fact, I'd gotten warmer inspections from my local IRS auditor. Where Behnaz was florid and portly, this man was pale and gangly looking, as if he'd been grown somewhere dark and moist. His face had a grim cast, made darker by a fringe of black beard and shaggy hair. Unlike the other lords, this noble had eschewed a fur-trimmed mantle for a set of armor made up of small steel plates. The segment above his heart bore the emblem of a pale half-moon.

I got a queasy feeling as I recognized the sigil. That was the sign worn by Sir Ivor, the knight who'd refused to help equip me and Galen when we'd set off to find the Old Man of the Mountain. At least until his senior officer, Commander Yervan, had showed up and

upbraided him for his ungallant behavior.

On cue, Sir Ivor appeared at what had to be his father's side. He leaned forward, not taking his eyes off me, and whispered urgently in his lord's ear. Immediately, the elder Ivor's face crinkled into a scowl of dislike. Great. Another one for the Chrissie Fan Club. At this rate, I was going to have trouble finding a room large enough to hold the meetings.

"May it please the nobles of the court," the page announced, "I present Lady Dayna Chrissie, of the Land of the Angels."

I blinked. *Land of the what?*

Apparently, my description of what 'Los Angeles' meant had gotten interpreted rather liberally by the court. Though I hadn't even opened my mouth before Lord Behnaz got the first jab in.

The heavyset man guffawed as he heard my introduction. "Land of the Angels? Likely they kicked this one out for soiling the place's name."

I kept my expression carefully neutral as the combined nobles let out a collective laugh. The laughter wasn't quite as venomous-sounding as when I'd first met the assembled nobility, courtesy of the ersatz Duke Kajari. But I'd be damned if I was going to let it pass.

"Apologies, my lord, but you misremember," I said evenly, thinking back to Galen's advice on how to address the court. "I wasn't kicked out, I was summoned here to Andeluvia without my prior consent. If I may remind you, I was brought in to solve the King's murder. A murder which some of the lords in this very room knew about, but declined to act in the name of justice. I suppose that, for some men, discretion is worth more to them than valor."

To my surprise, the reaction wasn't all one-sided against me. About half the lords muttered ominously under their breath. But the other half laughed at my comeback, and one even let out a small cheer. Apparently, Fitzwilliam didn't mind if his court wore their emotions on their collective sleeves. Behnaz scowled and began to speak, but Fitzwilliam cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"Please, Lord Behnaz, let us cease this joust at the last tilt," he stated firmly. "Lady Chrissie, you have been the main subject of

discussion just now. Frankly, I am surprised by the level of contention your presence has caused. Both by those present here, and by the others who plainly want you gone."

Another dumbfounded blink on my part.

"The…others, your Majesty?"

"Yes. The owls of our Parliament. They have thrice now rejected my requested budget for the kingdom. Curiously, it is over a single issue: my request to add a salary for an official Court Forensics Examiner."

"They object to a position you've offered to me? One which I haven't even accepted yet?"

"The very same."

My mind raced at this development. Obviously, Xandra and company were not happy about my repeated attempts to see Thea. That they were now working behind the scenes to get rid of me told me one thing: they were getting worried.

But why? What could I possibly learn from the Albess that had them so afraid?

One of these days, I was *definitely* going to have to find out what game the kingdom's owls were playing.

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Chapter Nine

I thought back to Galen's lessons on royal court etiquette. Luckily, he'd also drilled me on how the executive and legislative processes worked in Andeluvia.

"Your Majesty," I started, "while the ruler of the land must traditionally defer to the Parliament, doesn't he have the ultimate, final say over how the monies raised are spent?"

King Fitzwilliam nodded. "You are correct. But the ruler must, as you note, defer unless there is a truly pressing reason. I will admit that I am puzzled by this development. While our Parliamentarians have always had a reputation for grasping at coins like a hawk snatching up a hare, this is something new and strange."

A stern, yet strangely whispery voice cut the air as Lord Ivor spoke. His armor *clinked* as he shifted position in his chair. "Your Majesty, this may be a strange development, but it is hardly worth our trouble. This woman's employment stands in the way of the funds you promised me to restore the Royal Highway that leads from your palace to East Port's docks. Unless the crown wishes that the road leading my people here resemble a cow path more than a highway of the King?"

"And your Majesty has promised me at least three sacks of golden crowns," Lord Behnaz added quickly. "My problems with bandits and roving gangs of brigands have only gotten worse. I need more men, more swords, more armor. Elsewise I cannot guarantee the stability of the Western reaches."

This time the muttering around the tables was more pronounced. A couple of voices in the crowd stood out, and none were in my favor. "We don't need this, not now!" "This woman's not worth fighting over." "Why tie up the royal purse strings over this nonsense?"

Fitzwilliam raised his hand. Eventually, the room finally fell silent.

“I agree with you, my loyal nobles,” he sighed. “This is a trivial matter. The gold crowns to be allocated for a Court Forensic Examiner are trifling compared to the needs for arms, for roads, for men. And yet, because it is such a pittance, I am inclined to grant said salary to Lady Chrissie over the Parliament’s objections. Unless one of you, kind lords, can explain to me how granting a single woman’s salary will impoverish one or both Reaches?”

The room went silent. The warmth I felt inside from the ale bubbled up as I realized that no one could come up with anything to gainsay the King’s logic. Fitzwilliam looked as if he really was going to go to bat for me.

Of course, that good feeling lasted only for a few seconds.

Just my rotten luck.

“Your majesty, I object.” And with that, Sir Ivor, the son of the old Lord Ivor, stood up and addressed the throne. “I agree that the amount in question is small. Only the truly miserly would object to the coins spent.”

King Fitzwilliam’s fingers stopped in their irritated drumming. “Then what is your objection, son of Ivor?”

“The fact that she is not fit for this court.”

“Not fit for my court? Explain.”

A quick whisper took place between the elder and younger Ivor. The elder one continued the argument. “Your Majesty, at the risk of seeming the braggart, I must remind you that my family has served the crown loyally for six generations. Lord Behnaz, for almost as long as that.”

“I would hesitate before touting Lord Behnaz’s service to my father,” Fitzwilliam remarked acidly. Behnaz turned visibly pale as his ruler continued. “His loyalty is that of a rug: only steady if it is trodden underfoot.”

“Be that as it may, all those serving in your court are of blood that is either noble, or of proven worth. All but one: that half-animal *thing* which you keep as the Court Wizard.”

That little jab hit home for me. I fixed the old man with a glare as I spoke. “That ‘half-animal thing’ put his skin on the line for this

kingdom when your own son was 'bravely' risking himself guarding doors and fetching horses from the royal stables."

Lord Ivor glowered at me, but continued to talk only to Fitzwilliam.

"Nevertheless, my opinion stands: you cannot appoint a woman to your service who will disgrace this court. She is not noble. She has not rendered service to this crown. And thus, she is not a Lady, no matter what the pages deem her upon introduction."

Sir Ivor pounded his fist on the table next to his father for emphasis. "No service, no nobility, no appointment!"

Most of the lords, Behnaz included, took up the cry, repeating the words. Again, Fitzwilliam raised a hand to quiet the room. It took longer this time around, and at the end of it my heart sank. The strength of the opposition was making King Fitzwilliam hesitate; he would only go so far in his support for me.

"What have you to say about this, Lady Chrissie?" he asked. Some more grumbling followed the use of the word 'Lady', but the King ignored it. "No one of this land can vouch for your birth, so can you prove service to the crown?"

In truth, I couldn't have cared less about this issue of court titles. But I did want to keep the job option open, more than ever. Without realizing it, having the offer in the back of my mind had helped me keep my sanity when dealing with idiots like McClatchy and their toadies like Ollivar. *Hell with all of this, I'm upping stakes for Andeluvia!*

And now that could all be snatched away in a moment.

"Your Majesty, noble lords," I said, "Do not forget my service in bringing the murderer of the Good King Benedict to justice."

"What service?" Behnaz laughed contemptuously. "You did not serve of your own free will, at the behest of the crown. You just admitted before this noble court that you were summoned here *without your consent*."

God *damn* that man. Even the King nodded agreement on that point.

"Then do not forget my service in bringing the murderer of

Captain Vazura to justice."

Now it was Lord Ivor's turn to sneer. "Vazura was killed aiding your cause…which was to help the fayleene, not this kingdom."

"I alerted this kingdom to the threat of war and destruction," I doggedly went on. "The threat of the spirit stone. The threat of the stone dragon, Sirrahon. And perhaps the re-kindling of a very old war!"

"The spirit stone was evil, indeed. Where is your proof that they had designs on any kingdom except that of the fayleene? As for this so-called dragon, has anyone at this table so much as *seen* or *heard* of this 'Sirrahon'?"

"Commander Yervan," King Fitzwilliam called, "step forward and speak on this issue."

An older knight wearing gold-trimmed plate armor stepped out of the shadows behind the throne. The Commander of the Palace Guard bowed to one and all before speaking.

"My lords, I and my scouts have seen much evidence of a dragon's rampage to the north and east. Both the Fayleene Woods and the Great Northern Forest beyond the Khaiber Pass are naught but cinders for now."

"Well, then," Ivor said, "have you seen the cause of this destruction? Have you tracked it? I am no forester, but surely there are reasons that a wood can catch fire, other than from a dragon's breath?"

Yervan looked glum as he answered. "No one has seen the cause of the forest's destruction. As for tracking, my scouting parties followed a swath of downed trees and crushed rocks for a score of leagues to the east from the Fayleene Woods. Afterwards, the tracks simply…stopped. Vanished."

"You see?" Ivor shook his finger at the assembled nobles. "These threats are fairy tales. Nursery-maid stories created to stir us up, that is all. And as far as this old 'war' of yours? Wake us all when you spot the banners of the phantom army that's supposed to invade us!"

The chorus of 'hear, hear!' from the assembled men hit me like

a slap across the face. It was enough to make me drop the disturbing thought that crossed my mind for a split second: *How could anything as big and mean-tempered as Sirrahon simply vanish into thin air?*

Part of me wanted to crawl away, find a hole, and jump into it. But another part, one that was fueled by the liquid courage I'd had from a silver tankard, wanted to speak up.

And with one of those weird little *clicks* in my brain, I knew what to say.

"My lords, I am providing a service to the kingdom as we speak," I announced, sounding a heck of a lot more confident than I felt. "Your Majesty, I am working on a case that is critical to your realm. It appears that a griffin has brought something very rare and valuable from my world into this one. I plan to find that griffin and bring them to account!"

An amazed series of whispers ran through the room like electricity. Ivor's scowl redoubled itself as he asked, "How does this affect the realm?"

"Where do you think this kingdom's Air Cavalry get their mounts?"

"Well met, Lady Chrissie," King Fitzwilliam said approvingly. "What are you doing to pursue closure of this case?"

If I was in this far, I was in for the whole enchilada. "I have a plan. To enact it, I must travel to where the griffins live and run my quarry to ground."

"So be it!" the King declared. "I have heard enough objections for the day. Lady Dayna Chrissie of the Land of Angels, I charge you to go to those lands as my agent. Before night falls, you will bring a copy of your plans to me. I shall in turn give you a token of my support to use in that land."

"Thank you, your Majesty. I shall not fail."

"See that you do not. If you succeed, none here shall have any bar to your claim to speak as part of my Royal Court. If you fail…I see no reason for you to return to service in Andeluvia ever again."

I gave the clumsiest of curtseys and then turned to walk out. I moved very slowly, as I wasn't about to let any member of this high-

born peanut gallery see my legs tremble as I left. A pair of red-and-black attired royal guards opened the doors to allow me to exit. Then they swung the heavy doors shut with a *boom*.

Galen and Shaw came up to me, their expressions worried.

"We were able to listen to most of what took place," Galen informed me. "The throne room's echoes pick up all but the slightest whispers."

"Then you heard what I have to do," I said. "What I volunteered to do."

"That we did," Shaw nodded. "Thou hast spoken well in a hard place. But one question doth trouble me: what is this 'plan' thou spoke of?"

I swallowed hard. "My plan? I have no idea."

Galen let out a long-suffering sigh. "That is exactly what I feared you would say."

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Chapter Ten

The day after I met with King Fitzwilliam promised a bright autumn morning full of sunshine. But that was about the only good thing going for it. I pulled Fitzwilliam's token out of my new backpack and set it on Galen's work table. The little bronze badge hung at the end of a fine metal chain. It bore the imprint of a horse's hoof, a scribble of arcane symbols, and a vague approximation of the king's face in profile. It sat shining in the sun, looking like a rather gaudy tourist bauble.

"It's pretty," I sighed, "but I'm not sure how useful it's going to be."

"It might be more useful than you think," Galen said, as he put his tools aside and extended a large, calloused hand towards me. "Allow me to examine it."

I gave him the badge and looked around, trying rather poorly to hide my rampant curiosity. According to Galen, his living quarters were on the ground floor of Fitzwilliam's palace, along with an equine-sized latrine placed conveniently close to the stables. I'm not sure that he wasn't pulling my leg on that one, having never visited his rooms.

Of course, what really fascinated me was our current locale: his wizardly workshop on the second floor. The high-peaked doors had been shut with a glistening seal of magic energy set in a star pentagram. A single muttered incantation, and the star flickered out, allowing us to enter.

The interior looked a lot like I'd expected. Tall shelves crammed with moldy-smelling books and rolls of parchment loomed on each side. Sets of tables sat by the wall with the windows, holding everything from glass jars with brightly colored liquids to miniature terrariums containing creepy looking mossy plants and even creepier looking bugs.

Aside from the fine layer of dust that covered most everything,

it looked like Galen did try to keep the place up. There was a sense of order in the room that reassured me more than I cared to admit. The other comforting factor was the way the place smelled. The mixtures of herbs and powders that Galen carried in his jacket pockets infused his clothes with a hint of exotic spice. Those same scents hung in the air here.

The Wizard had thrown open a set of glass doors at the far end of the room, revealing a spacious stone balcony. It allowed the light to fall more fully upon the closest table, which had been allocated as a special sort of work area. My Dad would have recognized the peg board that hung on a nearby wall, though the tools that hung there were strange. Most had dark stone handles and shards of glass embedded at the business end.

Several half-finished projects made up of gears and metallic coils lay upon the table's tool-scarred surface. I was pretty sure I recognized the one that the centaur had just been tinkering with – an item that looked like the love child of an egg beater and a spork. I'd seen it on the deceased Duke Kajari's desk back when I'd been looking for Benedict's killer.

"In my assessment, this badge does have significant value," Galen finally pronounced. "Essentially, it confers upon you the rank of 'envoy' to the Griffin Lands. That's only one rank below an ambassador."

"Okay…" I allowed, "maybe you can tell me what the difference is, then? I'm still trying to wrap my head around the whole 'diplomacy' thing in your world. Mostly it seems to be about convincing people you mean them no harm. At least until you can smack them with a rock."

The centaur let out an amused snort. "Simply put, an ambassador can sign treaties in the name of the King. You are not. However, an envoy is no mean rank. You can demand that a provision of a treaty be enforced. And should you be killed while performing your service, Fitzwilliam would be under a noble's obligation. To demand the culprit's head on a pike, or to take the kingdom to war in order to retrieve your body. So this is a very high honor indeed."

Just great. Well, as my mother would say, ‘it’s the thought that counts’.

Heavy wing beats and the soft *thump* of a landing came from the balcony. Shaw furled his wings and stuck his white-feathered head through the open doors. Though it was still hard to make out expressions on his stern eagle’s face, I was getting better at it. My griffin friend looked genuinely excited to have found me.

“Dayna,” Shaw declared, “‘tis amazing news I bring! Royal pages have brought to mine ears a request: that I transport you as a newly minted envoy to my homeland!”

And with that announcement, Grimshaw took a step back before turning to the side so I could see him more fully. Andeluvian steel glinted from his Air Cavalry breastplate. A shiny new leather saddle, held on by a cinch strap that went around his midsection, gleamed from his back. A thrill raced through me; I’d known about the trip, but actually seeing how I was going to get there made my heart begin to race in anticipation.

“I wish the reason was less grim,” I admitted, “but I’m truly looking forward to it.”

“Your reasoning impressed King Fitzwilliam,” Galen said. “I cannot help but wish that it had impressed him enough that I could join you.”

Grimshaw looked surprised at that. “Thou art staying here? Thou wouldst pass up the chance to perish gloriously for a just cause? For shame, Wizard!”

“In the first place, not all of us crave death as the defining moment of our lives. And secondly, it is not my choice. Alas, I am still the Court Wizard, and Fitzwilliam has me assigned to a special, confidential project.”

I came close to asking the obvious: *What project?* But a slight shake of Galen’s head nixed that idea. Instead, the Wizard snapped a second item to the badge’s chain, a familiar type of silver medallion, then followed it up with a much smaller gold one. Then he draped the entire collection of trinkets over my head. I tucked them under the dark windbreaker I’d chosen to wear for today.

"I recognize the silver medallion, at least," I said. "And I can use the easy transport between here and my world. What's the gold one for?"

"Communication. Should you need to summon me in a hurry."

"But 'ware the need for our Wizard to follow the rules laid out by mine own people," Shaw cautioned. "Under the treaty between this kingdom's people and the griffin-folk, you may use a spell to transport out of the Griffin Lands. But not *into* them, save without leave of the Elders of the aerie."

Galen nodded in confirmation. "Therefore, should you need me, I will utilize magic to arrive as quickly as possible – but I can only transport myself to the very border of the griffin demesne. You will need to do the same whenever you return from your world."

"The border 'tis not far," Shaw hurriedly added. "Scarcely a half-hour's flight, if that."

"True," Galen said, "but thirty minute's flight is an hour on the ground at a trot. And closer to three for a human on foot. The terrain can be very rugged."

"Worry not, Wizard. I shall ensure that our friend has means of conveyance back to where she needs to be."

The centaur turned back towards me. "Pray tell, what about food, shelter, and bedding? My understanding is that accommodations in the Griffin Lands are rather rustic."

"I heard that too," I agreed. "I'm prepared."

Using two hands, I hefted my backpack with a grunt. I gave it an affectionate pat. Before I'd blipped over to Andeluvia, I'd parked in front of a sporting goods store and waited for the clerks to open for the morning.

I lacked the zero-fat hiker's build and had a pasty complexion showing that the only tanning I'd done had been in front of a computer monitor. So the salesperson was stunned when I paid for a large pack suitable for a week-long wilderness expedition. Granted, I was only able to swallow the price by purchasing the 'floor special'. That meant I ended up with a pack in the same plastic shade of orange as a highway traffic cone.

“Doubtless you have implements from your world to cope with conditions at the griffin aerie,” Galen observed. “You seem confident that this trip will locate the griffin you seek.”

“I am. The Office of the Medical Examiner will be getting copies of the security camera tapes, but I can’t count on them to solve the case. The room was pretty dimly lit, and the cameras weren’t set to watch for anything approaching from above.”

“Then were you able to bring something to Andeluvia to help in your quest?”

I tugged at one of the pack’s zippers. “As a matter of fact, I brought the one thing that should blow this case wide open.”

With a *snap*, I opened a plastic case and held up the little toothbrush-shaped answer.

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Chapter Eleven

While I'd helped guide the fayleene across the northern reaches of Fitzwilliam's kingdom, I'd told my friends more about my day job. To my surprise, all three got the concept of cells and DNA more easily than King Fitzwilliam. Though somewhat skeptical of concepts like bacteria (Grimshaw doubted the existence of 'bugs too small to be espied by thine eye'), they accepted what I said in general.

At the very least, it gave me a basis from which I could explain DNA testing. Since DNA carried a being's unique genetic code, I was able to sum up its properties with the biology class jingle: *It's the slimy goo that makes you you!* And because DNA existed in every cell of the body, it certainly could be found in the griffin feather left at the crime scene.

Of course, Ollie had contaminated the outside of the feather when he'd handed it to me. But I figured that a quick swab inside the hollow part of the quill would yield cells that no biologist on earth had yet seen.

"There's a saying in my field," I explained. "You can't walk through a room without leaving a trace of yourself on *something*. Here, you might have skin cells, hair, and feathers. With humans, you can also look at the prints left behind by the pads at the tips of the fingers. Finding a specific type of fingerprint was how I got the break that solved my first big case."

"A griffin hath no finger 'pads'," Shaw pointed out.

"Then we'd have to look at paw prints. But the only computer programs that could match up the print of the paw work with existing databases. There's nothing like that here."

"Doth a 'database' exist for my kind's 'code'?"

"No, but there are programs which can 'sift' through the patterns of the genetic code until we find a match. Whichever griffin matches that of the feather will be our guilty party."

"You shall be plucking a great number of feathers," Galen

observed.

"Not feathers," I corrected as I held up the toothbrush-shaped utensil. "This is what's called a 'buccal' brush. You swab it on the inside of a subject's cheek and put it into a little plastic bag to prevent it from being contaminated."

"That would make it less of a chore, indeed."

"I sold the idea to King Fitzwilliam by suggesting that I approach the Council of Elders as a representative of his kingdom: one who is conducting a study to ensure that only the healthiest griffins serve with the Andeluvian Air Cavalry."

"Ah. That would explain his awarding you 'envoy' status. Among other things it would impress the urgency of your mission."

Shaw nodded vigorously as he added, "And 'tis lucky indeed that the griffins serving with the Air Cavalry shall return home for the Rite of the Autumn Winds. Many warriors are nigh obsessed with joining the Cavalry. You shan't have much of a problem getting volunteers for your samples, especially if it tells which doth possess superior health."

"I'm not sure that I'll be able to tell much," I hedged. "Griffin genes are going to confuse the hell out of any lab. But if there are any questions of parentage in the aerie, I should be able to answer them."

For the first time today, my friends' reactions caught me off guard. My last statement was met with a knowing chuckle from the Wizard, while the griffin let out something close to an avian guffaw. I stood there, confused, until Shaw placed a furry paw on my shoulder.

"A griffin hath no question as to what their parentage might be," he reassured me. "Your thought is kind, but 'ere you offer, be aware that it shall bring forth laughter."

"What? I mean, why would it–"

"I suspect that you need to see how griffins mate," Galen said, with a smile. "And from that you shall see how they handle the resulting issues of lineage."

I frowned, puzzled. "It sounds like I should."

"And if you are to see anything, it is time that you depart. Daylight is burning, as the griffins say. Even now, it will be well

towards evening by the time you get there."

Shaw turned to his side again and crouched down a little for me. I slipped on my backpack with Galen's help and then swung up into the griffin's saddle. There was a creak of leather as my weight settled into place.

Galen beamed at me. "Fare thee well, Dayna. I charge you, Shaw: do not let her out of your sight if you can help it. Strange forces are at work here, and I mistrust them."

"Your mistrust and mine," Shaw responded seriously. "Much have I pondered upon this very thing, and I shall protect her life with mine."

"And I'm hoping that you won't have to put yourself in that spot," I chimed in. "Farewell, Galen. I'll be keeping these gifts of yours close."

The centaur bowed and took a few steps back. Shaw raised his head and unfurled his wings. With a trio of mighty beats, we leapt into the air as if someone had fired us out of a circus cannon. In a moment, the balcony fell away. The *snap* of fabric by my ear gave me a start, as I realized how close we'd passed to the red-and-black pennon atop the palace's highest tower.

Galen had given me a ride before. The experience had been singularly underwhelming, since I was preoccupied with holding on and seeing anything over his broad shoulder was nearly impossible. I'd also ridden Shaw in a pinch. His lumbering pace on the ground translated into a gentle, rocking ride.

This was different - exciting and terrifying in equal measure.

The ground fell away, turning into a tangle of city streets populated by ant-like people and dotted with spires and flapping banners. That was somewhat familiar, since I'd been up once or twice in a small plane.

But an airplane muted the experience, making it more distant. The comforting confines of the cabin window, the buzz or whoosh of the engine, made one passive, like a viewer watching television.

Right in the here and now, the screen was gone. Wind blasted me in the face, making me squint if I looked directly ahead. My hair

tossed back and forth, whipping my cheeks when we banked. Every aspect of this flight was real and raw, cold and exhilarating!

The only sounds – aside from my startled 'eek!' as we took off – were the beats of Shaw's wings in my ears. Well, that and my heavy breathing, once I realized that there was no seat belt or anything to keep me from falling off Shaw's back. I swallowed hard and grabbed on for dear life to a bulge on the saddle's front, roughly where the pommel would be.

"Art thou feeling well?" Shaw inquired, in a voice that was as unconcerned as if he'd been on the ground, munching on a raw leg of lamb.

"I'm fine, really," I said. "This is all just very…new to me."

A soft chuckle. "Many new to the Air Cavalry come nigh to sobbing in fear upon their first flight. Bravery resides in thy soul."

I pried one of my hands from the pommel-bump and patted Shaw on his shoulder in thanks. Right then, we passed through the gossamer surface of a low cloud. I suppressed a shiver as a deliciously cool wetness pressed against my skin. It was over in a few seconds and we broke out into the sun again.

Time passed as Shaw continued his steady flight, heading in a general southerly direction. The gray stone buildings of the city around Fitzwilliam's palace gave way to smaller, more isolated farm houses surrounded by well-tended farmland and orchards. Eventually, the farmland turned into forest, spitted through with a single silvery-gray paved road.

"Does that road run all the way to the Griffin Lands?" I asked.

"Nay, that road doth run to its end at a port. One that belongs to the little country of Kescar. Our journey shall part ways with it, as it runs south where we turn west."

The name 'Kescar' sounded familiar. Then it came back to me. That land's ambassador had been killed in the same murder plot that took Good King Benedict's life. And I'd seen two more of their people recently in Fitzwilliam's throne room. I recalled that Captain Vazura had said the border regions nigh to the sea were poor places where the people couldn't afford horses for their travels. I mentioned as

much to Shaw.

Shaw nodded as he retracted one wing slightly to bank us to the west.

“‘Tis true enough, one supposes. Knowest I little of Kescar, save that it is a humble place. They are known for their ample-sized fishing fleet and not much else.” I detected the hint of a sniff as he added, “They lack the mark of a true warrior culture.”

Up ahead, the land lost its gentle roll and began to rear up into tumbled foothills and rugged, stony highlands. Off to the left, the forest sloped down towards a wide sandy beach. I smelled salt in the air and caught a glimpse of blue. Shaw let out a squawk and jabbed a paw up at about ten o’clock high.

“Have my senses gone tricksy? Do you see it as well, Dayna?”

I squinted in the direction he indicated. My poor human eyes were nowhere near as good as an aging griffin’s, but finally, I spotted something. I saw a mass of black specks, no larger than poppy seeds at this distance, silhouetted high above against the white of a towering cumulus cloud.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Wyverns. Dragon creatures like to my own size, or larger. But they do not swarm as such, not unless they have fallen upon prey.”

“Prey?” My stomach gave a gentle tug, as if to remind me how quickly it could tie itself into a knot. “What could they prey upon out here?”

Shaw didn’t answer. His eyes were fixed upon the rapidly growing specks. Each black spot resolved itself into a long, skinny object like a snake with scaly bat wings glued to its back. I counted more than fifty of the creatures before I gave up. But I did notice that the swarm was ignoring us and heading for a spot far below, on the beach.

“Ah, mine eyes see it now!” Shaw said, and his voice took on an excited tone. I felt his fur prick up around my legs, and his wing beats began to quicken. “Up and to the right! Three lances of griffin warriors approach!”

Again, it took me a moment to find what Shaw was looking at.

Then the scene snapped into focus. Higher up and behind the swarm were a dozen griffins, divided into three quartets of flyers. Each ‘lance’, as Shaw put it, flew in a diamond-shaped formation. The griffins moved at a terrific speed, closing in just as the wyverns had begun landing at the edge of the beach.

“They’re stalking the wyverns!” I said incredulously.

“Nay, not *stalking*. Getting into position to attack!”

“At four-to-one odds, or worse?”

“Of course! The fewer warriors in the battle, the greater the share of honor!”

And with that pronouncement, the griffin lances half-folded one of their wings. In unison, they banked and dove towards the swarm like a squadron of fighter planes from the Second World War. A distant scream resonated in my ears as the warriors went into their attack. That scream was echoed from Shaw’s beak.

I followed suit with a scream of my own as Shaw folded his wings and plummeted towards the earth below like a fur-and-feather covered stone.

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Chapter Twelve

Shaw angled his wings, turning his plummet into a full corkscrew dive. The landscape below us turned from a comforting quilt of forest into a big green and brown smear. Blood rushed to my head, making my skin flush. My stomach decided enough was enough and tried to leap up into my throat to strangle me and end it all.

The dive was one part horror, two parts terror, like being on an out-of-control roller-coaster. One that was suspended hundreds of feet in the air. Oh, and without seat belts.

"Shaw!" I screamed. "Grimshaw!"

The rush of the wind against my face robbed my lungs of any real sort of air. Anything else I had to say came out in a breathless rush: "*ShawdammitwillyoucutitoutwearegoingtoDIE!"*

Of course, this didn't slow him down at all.

I figured that the only mode of communication I had was body language.

So, I did what any good friend would do to another, in just such a situation.

I kicked him as hard as I could in the side.

Lucky for me, I'd purchased some decent-quality hiking boots to go along with my ridiculous traffic-cone colored backpack. They weren't steel-toed, but the tips were a bit harder than on the shoes I normally wore to the office. That said, I don't think Shaw would have noticed had I not slipped back in the saddle during the griffin's Dive of Death. When I kicked out, I managed to hit the edge of his armored chest plate. It got his attention, much like a human tapping another human's shoulder. He stopped the upchuck-inducing corkscrew and brought us back to halfway level flight.

His voice came out in an impatient growl. "What dost thou want?"

It took me a moment to answer. My brain was reeling and I was doing my best not to puke my guts up all over Shaw's proud eagle

head. Also, the air just ahead of us was filled with horrific screams of pain and slaughter.

The three griffin lances sliced back and forth among the section of the wyvern swarm that had not yet landed. Their behavior reminded me of a nature film I'd seen where a group of sharks carved their way through a 'bait ball' of sardines that had clustered into a tight school for safety. The speed of the attack and my still blurry vision made it difficult to see specifics, but a couple of images pressed themselves into my eyeballs.

Each lance exploded through the densely packed wyverns. One griffin emerged with a thick green neck or tail wedged in his black, jackhammer-stout beak. A *snap*, and pieces fell away on either side.

"Shaw," I gasped, "you…you can't take us right into a battle like that!"

My griffin friend let out a gruff-sounding squawk and then did a double-take.

"Thou art correct! I have nearly deprived you of your chance for glory! I shall land, and thou shalt engage the enemy with blood and fire as much as I!"

Well, that hadn't exactly been my goal. But Shaw had said the magic words: *I shall land*.

He came in low and fast. The forest abruptly ended and we shot out over the sandy expanse of the beach. It wasn't a mass of grainy dunes like I had expected. A cat's cradle of ravines cut their way down sandy berms nearly all the way to the water's edge.

I spotted the wyvern swarm's 'prey' where it lay beached at the high-water mark. A two-masted fishing boat lay upon the sand, its sails completely shredded and nets still dangling from its stern. As Shaw flared his wings and prepared to land atop one of the berms, I got one final glimpse over the boat's side.

The deck lay awash in blood, wreckage, and a half-dozen or so badly mangled human corpses. Whoever these people were, they hadn't gone down without a fight. An empty crossbow rested in the arms of one headless body. Fired bolts stuck out of the flanks of at least three felled wyverns that lay nearby.

Shaw kicked up a vortex of sand and dust as he landed. If not for the weight of my backpack, I'd have leapt off. As it was, I slid off as quickly as I could. It took some mental restraint, but I managed to avoid throwing myself on the ground and kissing it.

"The enemy was after this Kescar fishing boat," Shaw said excitedly. "So thou shouldst find foes in abundance here! Good hunting, Dayna!"

And with that, he took off into the air in a flurry of wing beats. He was right about the abundant foes, anyway. Wyverns continued to circle in a flock, hissing and spitting at the griffins and even at each other as they came in to land.

Up close, these creatures looked different than Sirrahon, or the lesser dragons that I'd fought beside Galen in the Fayleene Woods. Wyverns didn't have the relatively stocky build of the former, nor the racing-stripe colors of the latter. Instead, they were sinuous, slightly longer than the average griffin but with about half the bulk. In fact, they closely resembled the Chinese depictions of dragons, and they came in two color schemes: emerald green and jet black. Leathery scales made up wings that extended from the rear of their forelimbs, similar to some species of bat.

Regardless of what Shaw had done for me in dropping me off, I was going to do my best to stay out of this fight unless absolutely necessary. As far as I could tell there wasn't anyone left alive to rescue, and the griffins looked like they were more than holding their own. So the first thing I did was to slip off my backpack, since it stood out like an orange beacon amidst the browns, blues, and greens of the surrounding landscape.

Next up, I half-ran, half-scrabbled away from the pack to put a few yards between me and it. The steep-sided berm that Shaw had deposited me on wasn't all that big, but at least it had a few scrubby bushes growing atop it. I pushed my way into the largest one, crouched down, and prayed that it wasn't the Andeluvian equivalent of poison oak. Finally, I unzipped my jacket and pulled out two more items. One was the chain that held the trio of medallions Galen had given me – especially the one which could teleport me home if things

got out of control.

The second was my gun. A quick check, and I flipped off the safety. I grimly reflected upon the idea that I was still going to have to work around Lieutenant Ollivar if I wanted to keep it. The backup plan was that I could buy my own weapon and then try to qualify on a civilian range, but I wouldn't be able to bring it to work, on assignment, or keep it on my person anywhere as easily. Hardly the best option.

A predatory eagle's shriek yanked me back to the present. Several of the griffins had landed near the remains of the boat. It turned out that they were just as deadly on the ground as in the air. Talons slashed and beaks tore into the enemy; in a couple of cases, an enemy was slammed to the ground with a quickly unfurled wing. But the battle wasn't completely one-sided. Almost every member of the three lances bled from at least one wound. Two had been hobbled by bites to a fore or hind leg.

Suddenly, a single griffin went down under a coiling, writhing mass of the enemy. Terrible wet, shredding noises emanated from the pile as the wyverns tore their victim apart. Their long jaws were mounted at the ends of snakelike necks and were crammed with needle-shaped teeth. Though limited in motion by their wings, I noticed that the reptiles' front feet were surprisingly dexterous, allowing humanlike gripping and tearing motions.

The coil of wyverns flew apart as the largest of the griffins, one of the few that hadn't been wounded yet, smashed bodily through the mass of the enemy. Hisses of outrage filled the air, then turned into yowls of pain as the griffin slashed through one wyvern, then another.

As one, the swarm's focus turned towards this lone griffin. A baker's dozen of wyverns dropped from the air and closed in. They hadn't taken more than a few wing beats before two more griffins swooped in to guard the first one's flanks. One had a slightly lighter gold coat; the other had a killing glint in his eye and sported an Andeluvian steel breastplate.

In spite of myself, I couldn't help but think: *Go get them, Grimshaw!*

An eagle's screech reverberated from all three as they dove forward into combat. Shaw's talons and beak were a blur that tore or bit limbs from each foe. What the other two did so surprised me that I almost stood up to see it more clearly. Each of the pair faced down three of the largest wyverns remaining. The two griffins crouched into defensive positions…

And then they swung their lion's tails around to the sides and made them undulate like snakes. A gleam from each of their tails caught my eye. In a flash, I realized that both griffins had tipped their tails with a hard, shiny metal point.

Their tails danced and moved with a grace that I hadn't thought possible, the wyverns' eyes locking onto the movement. A couple shook their heads as if to clear them. Then the smaller of the two griffins moved to attack. In the blink of an eye, he tore the throats out of his enemies as they remained in a trancelike state.

The larger griffin slashed his foreclaws out to one side, decapitating the two wyverns on his left. He stiffened the end of his tail and then plunged the metal point like a spear into the eye of the remaining one. Neither of the two so much as paused to survey their handiwork, leaping to join the fight that still swirled around Grimshaw.

Another eagle cry, this one from much closer. Yet another griffin fought a quintet of foes on the stern of the grounded boat. Beak and talons flashed, and the guts of two wyverns spilled out onto the fouled deck. The other three reptiles charged in, smashing their opponent back into one of the tangles of fishing net.

The griffin fought back furiously, slashing another foe to pieces and pushing back across the deck towards the bow of the wrecked boat. Loops and rills of netting draped over all of the combatants, though the pace of battle was fierce enough that none paid it any attention. The last two wyverns moved in and tried to crush their opponent against the boat's wooden railing.

With a *crack*, the railing gave way. All three creatures rolled backwards across the sand and then down into the small slot canyon right below where I crouched in relative safety. Nightmarish hisses

rose from the canyon below.

As well as the despairing cry of the trapped griffin.

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Chapter Thirteen

The smells of warm sand, sweat, animal musk and blood wafted up to my nose.

"Damn it all!" I cursed.

The Dayna of the LAPD, the Dayna of six months ago, was a much more sensible person. That Dayna knew very well that she didn't have a 'dog in the fight', as her friend Shelley would have said.

But the Dayna of the here and now wasn't about to let one of Shaw's kin come to harm if she could help it.

I gripped my gun so tightly the sweat in my palm threatened to make it *squirp* out of my grip. I climbed out of the bush, moving to the edge of the berm. Now I was exposed to anyone who wanted to swoop in and make me several inches shorter by severing my stupid head.

The griffin lay about fifteen feet below me and a little off to the left. Coils and snarls of netting and deck rope wrapped so tightly around the creature's body that all but a slight motion of the beak and neck were impossible. Movement further down the canyon to my right caught my eye. One of the wyverns, a spiky-looking reptile the color of a fresh oil slick, thrashed its way free from the pieces of net holding it. With a teakettle hiss, it advanced towards its trapped foe.

No matter how far I leaned out, I couldn't get a good shot at it from where I crouched. My throat brutally dry, I forced myself to swallow. It was now or never.

I sat down and swung my legs out over the side of the berm. Then I pushed off with my free hand and went skidding down along with a miniature landslide of sand. I landed with a grunt, water squishing around my feet and flowing over the tops of my shoes. Icy needles pricked their way through my absorbent socks.

The wyvern was surprised to see me, to say the least. It obviously could tell I was a human, but I wasn't running screaming from it. The reptile was only ten or so yards away, but it raised its head ominously, looking big and dangerous to any potential foe.

It also gave me a perfect target. I raised my gun, carefully took aim at the monster's scaly forehead, and squeezed the trigger three times.

My shot grouping was pretty bad. One bullet went high and threw up a little puff of sand from the top of the far berm. Another dug out a bloody crater in the wyvern's throat. Not great, but the last went exactly where I wanted it: right between the creature's eyes. Said eyes went out like a light that had been switched off. With a *thump*, the thing fell dead in its tracks. Green and red ichor lay in chunks all down the back side of its head.

Behind me, the griffin continued to struggle. I didn't see the remaining wyvern anywhere, so I holstered my gun and sloshed through the water and wet sand to see if I could help. Though the griffin could only move its head so far, one of its eyes swiveled to watch me as I approached.

"It's okay," I said, putting as much assurance into my voice as I could. I even raised my hands to show I meant no harm. "I won't hurt you, I'm a friend of the griffins. My name is Dayna Chrissie, and I'm here with Grimshaw of the Andeluvian Air Cavalry."

I got a blink of surprise from that. Then I got a surprise of my very own. The griffin spoke to me in a bell-clear, melodious woman's voice.

"I understand," she said. "I am called Hollyhock. You, I should name 'Dragon-Hand', for you shoot flames from your fingers! Truly, my father Grimshaw keeps strange company."

That reply made me do a double-take. Actually, it made me do a triple-take.

For starters, I was as guilty as a chauvinistic man in assuming that all the warriors in a lance were males. Maybe it was because I'd only met male griffins like Grimshaw and Firewing so far. More likely it was because I'd mentally categorized griffins into the 'all looking alike' category.

That categorization fell to pieces at a second glance. A fringe of downy feathers graced the trailing edge of Hollyhock's wings. Her eyes were set slightly wider apart, with gold irises tinged jade green at

the outer edge. Finally, her build was slighter, and where Shaw's beak and neck were sharp, straight lines, hers were softly curved. Taken all together, these features made her look distinctly feminine, though no less deadly than her companions.

But what really made the thunderclap go off in my head was the fact that she called Shaw her 'father'. For some reason, it hit me like a ton of bricks: *This was Shaw's daughter.*

"Uh, yeah." I grasped a length of the net, trying to figure out where to start to untangle the mess. "I can only shoot fire with a special device from my world. And I can only do it a few times."

Hollyhock strained against the piece of net over her face as the section I pulled went taut. A snap of her beak and a small chunk peeled away, freeing her neck another few degrees. Her gold-green irises swiveled like a pair of rifle sights as she spoke again.

"Let us hope you can do it at least one more time," she said calmly. "There is a wyvern coming up behind you."

I didn't hesitate: in a flash, I pulled my gun and swung around.

The emerald green scales of the remaining wyvern gleamed in the light as it stalked down the canyon towards us. It rested one taloned foot on the still-steaming corpse of its predecessor and let out a long snarl. The thing wasn't even that close, but I could smell its rank breath. Carrion and something like hot metal made me wince.

I squeezed my weapon's trigger again and again. In fact, I emptied what was left in my magazine at it. One of the thing's eyes went dark. It howled and fled back up the canyon into the darkness.

"It will be back," Hollyhock stated. "You must free me, hurry!"

I holstered my gun with shaking fingers. I had an extra magazine, but it was in the pack at the top of the berm. Along with a Swiss Army knife I could have used to help cut this damned netting. Of course.

"Doing my best," I said grimly.

It felt like it took forever, but I found another length of netting that I could pull taut. It compressed the griffin's throat, making it tough for her to breathe, but she could reach it to slice through it with her beak.

A cough. “Better. One more coil, and I shall be able to move my neck freely again. I am lucky that my sire brought you.”

I methodically combed through the massive tangle of lines. It took real effort to tamp down the gut-wrenching urge to hurry. I had to find the right one to pull!

To keep the awful feeling of panic at bay, I remarked, “So…if you’re Grimshaw’s daughter, why don’t you speak like him?”

I received a puzzled blink in response. “How else should I speak?”

“I’m used to hearing a few more ‘thees’ and ‘thous’.”

“Ah. My father is of the older generation. The traditional ways of speech die hard.”

I found the right line to pull. Leaning back, I gave it a yank as I heard a rapidly approaching hiss from behind me. Hollyhock’s beak made short work of it, leaving her head and neck free. She began desperately tearing at the other lines that bound her as I whirled around. Reflexively, I groped for my now-empty weapon.

The wounded wyvern, its right eye a bloody, cratered socket, half-flew and half-slithered down the canyon. I’d forgotten how fast they could move. Time slowed to a deadly crawl as the thing’s mouth gaped open, revealing row upon row of needle-sharp teeth.

With a *ka-WHAM*, a boulder dropped in from up above, crushing the monster. The thing’s tail twitched once, and then went still. The largest of the griffins I’d seen in action hovered above the narrow canyon for a moment, kicking up a dusty vortex of sand and mud. Then he furled his wings in midair and landed with a *splosh* in the wet sand.

“I did not mean that. To rob you of your kill,” the larger griffin said, in a voice carrying a lot of bass. For a second I thought he was apologizing to me, but his eyes met only his trapped companions. His sentences were short, choppy, and lacked Shaw’s archaic inflection. “You could have handled it. You had a strong human here to protect you.”

“Go pass a clutch of eggs, Blackthorn!” Hollyhock shot back. She returned to the task of snapping and biting her way free of the

nets.

A deep-throated chuckle was all she got in reply before Blackthorn turned to address me. “Do not mind her. I am her elder sibling. I take joy in ruffling her feathers.”

That got my mind racing again. *Sibling? So this is another of Shaw’s kids!*

And just like that, the day promised to get even *more* interesting.

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Chapter Fourteen

The griffin spread his magnificent wings for a moment as he bowed his head to me. Aside from his size, Blackthorn's distinguishing feature was a sprinkling of black spots that ran across his face from either side of his beak up to and over his eyes. Depending on the angle one viewed him from, he either looked as if he were scowling or weeping.

"I am Blackthorn of the Reyka Pride," he announced. "The battle has been won. You have helped us. You kept one of us from being hurt. So, my Lance Captain owes you. I shall fly you out. Take you back home to Kescar."

"Ah. Well, thank you for the offer," I managed to stammer out as my stomach vehemently voted 'no' against another flight. "I'd have done the same for any griffin I could help, Blackthorn. But I'm not from Kescar. My name is Dayna Chrissie, and I'm traveling to your homeland with your father, Grimshaw."

"Dayna Chrissie? Your name. It sounds familiar."

"Because she is from that other world," Hollyhock put in. With a last couple of *snaps* of her beak, she finally pulled free of the nets. "Grimshaw has spoken to the Elders on her behalf and bestowed great praise upon her."

That was encouraging. It was nice to know that Shaw had spoken well of me, especially considering the subject matter. Most recently, I'd asked him to press the Elders on my behalf for information about the stone dragon, Sirrahon. They in turn had made him swear an oath not to leave the grounds of Fitzwilliam's palace until he'd spoken with Albess Thea. The one person in this world who refused to see me.

Or was being *kept* from seeing me.

"Then we speak later," Blackthorn declared, and I had to shield my eyes as he and Hollyhock took off in a whirlwind of beating wings.

I opted for climbing out of the ravine the old-fashioned way. It

was only about fifteen feet, but the sides were crumbly sand for the most part. I had to scramble onto the firmest parts and clamber up exposed roots and the odd rock.

A bright golden lion's paw extended down to me as I got close to the top. Grateful for the help, I grabbed it. The paw curled about my hand and effortlessly pulled me out of the ravine to stand atop the berm. It was the griffin I'd seen fighting next to Shaw. This one had a coat a shade or two lighter than the others, except for where a cut along one flank stained it red. The griffin sat looking me over curiously from head to toe for a few seconds. Just at the point when things were starting to feel awkward, he spoke in a voice that was deep, but an octave above Blackthorn's.

"I mean you no disrespect. You are the first human I have seen up close. You are strange looking, but I suppose that the Eternal Sky has a reason for the way you are put together."

Not much I could say to that. "Yeah, there are days I wonder about that, but thanks for the helping hand. Or paw, if you will."

The griffin made a cawing sound that approximated a laugh. "I am Lance Captain Ironwood. Grimshaw has told me who you are. Have my younger siblings been so rude as to not offer to fly you out from down there?"

I almost laughed myself, but for different reasons. *Another older brother? How many kids did Grimshaw have?*

"One was trapped, and the other did offer to fly me out but I turned him down. Your father leapt into battle once he saw your lances go into action. With me still atop his back. So, the idea of flight–"

"Say no more." He shook his head. "One of his three True Born I may be, but his rash love for combat only bred through completely in Blackthorn. Yet one needs a cooler head at times. It is why I command these lances and not he, though he is the greater fighter."

"You all seem tough enough," I said honestly. I noticed that Ironwood had called himself 'True Born' with more than a little pride. I certainly heard the capital letters he put into the title. "The other reason I wanted to climb up here is that I needed to get my

backpack."

"You mean this?" Ironwood reached off to one side into the bushes and held up my sand-smeared pack. It seemed undamaged, so I quickly slipped it back on. The Lance Captain turned his side to me and added, "Mount me so that we may join the others by the remains of the Kescar ship. I need to hear from my lances."

"Um…"

"Still your fears. I shall trot, not fly."

With that reassurance, I climbed onto Ironwood's back with about as much grace as a child scaling a haystack. Once I had my leg thrown over his side, the griffin moved out at a slow walk along the canyon lip. When we got to the seaward end, he spread his wings for balance as he half-slid down the sandy incline and took us over to the shattered remains of the fishing boat. The griffins had clustered around the corpse of their fallen comrade. What was left looked like a bald eagle and a ginger cat that had been hit by the business end of an eighteen-wheeler.

Shaw bounded up to me as I slid off Ironwood's back. His breaths came out in heavy wheezes, but otherwise he seemed no worse for wear. He let out a cry of relief and draped a paw over one of my shoulders.

"Dayna, thou art unhurt?" he asked. "Shamed I would be if my boast to our centaur friend was for ill. Battle madness overcame me when I should have been at thy side."

"I'm fine," I replied. "You'd be proud. I even got one 'kill'."

His golden eyes went wide. Then he turned, keeping his paw on my shoulder, showing me off to the group. "One kill to the human from another world! Thou canst see why I take pride in the naming of Dayna Chrissie as mine own friend."

The assembled griffins let out a chorus of caws and squawks in approval before their Lance Captain raised one taloned paw for silence. "Honored are we that my sire and his friend have joined us in this victory. We shall be her honor guard for the flight to the aerie. But even as we tell of our victory over the swarm, I need the leader of each lance to speak."

The griffin who stepped up first had a curved, feminine neckline and a fringe of feathers like Hollyhock. Flecks of gray mottling her coat implied that this griffin was closer to Shaw's age. My guesses were borne out as she spoke in an older woman's voice.

"As the second of thy lance, I report two injured warriors, none seriously. Thou hast been blessed in this battle, Captain."

I raised my eyebrows a little at that. The speaker appeared to be unhurt, but the two griffins behind her looked pretty beat up. One even held an obviously broken forepaw aloft so that he wouldn't put weight on it.

"Did you find any human survivors in the hold of the ship? Or in the woods surrounding the beach?"

"Nay, Captain, I did not."

Blackthorn stepped up next. The spots across his face made it look as if he were scowling right now. "Two injured. None serious. One fallen in battle. Honorably."

"Name the fallen."

"Cloudburst, of the Korlson Pride."

Ironwood looked pained, but not surprised. "I told them. I told the council that she was too young to be in a combat lance."

"I agree. I was not allowed to teach her the Way of the Serpent."

At the mention of that, Shaw removed his paw from my shoulder. He peered intently at both Blackthorn and the Lance Captain, as if weighing everything that was said.

"What was she schooled in?" Ironwood asked his brother.

"Rolling Mountain. Sea Wind."

"Those are good, I suppose. Very…traditional."

Shaw, to my surprise, seemed to bristle at that.

Blackthorn looked gloomy as he added, "I did what I could to protect her."

"You are not meant to mind a family's chicks on the battlefield!" Hollyhock stated firmly. I spotted a glint of silver at her breast, and realized that she wore a silver chain with a tiny pendant. It rode up under her outermost layer of feathers, making it hard to

see. “The stain of failure lies upon the pride of Korlson.”

Ironwood waved off the objection. “Rather, I would have the wyvern bear the stain of her death. But since you are so eager to speak, report on your own lance.”

Hollyhock’s expression turned grim as she answered.

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Chapter Fifteen

"My lance has three injured," Hollyhock stated. "One of them seriously."

She made a motion, and one of her subordinates limped forward. In truth, this griffin's wounds did look like he should be headed for surgery. His right hind leg had been badly gashed, and his body bore at least three wounds that still dripped blood. One of his wings lay flat against his back, crumpled midway by a serious bite.

"I am Gorse, of the Reyka Pride," the griffin said, his voice strained by pain. "I am broken yet unbowed, Lance Captain."

"Well met, pride-mate," Ironwood said encouragingly. "Do you feel that you will bleed to death?"

"I have enough juice within me yet, sir."

"Can you move on the ground, if not the air?"

"Well enough."

"Then I charge you with journeying to Kescar Port. Travel east along this shore until you arrive. Inform them of the events here before you return to the aerie."

"I shall, Lance Captain."

To my astonishment, Gorse limped down towards the waves. He moved so that the westering sun fell on his bloodied back and began a wobbly walk towards the eastern horizon.

"Wait, aren't you going to send someone with him?" I demanded. "Gorse looked pretty badly wounded to me! What if he passes out on the way to Kescar?"

"I understand thy concern," Shaw assured me. "But he shall not. Honor will not allow him to do so. And the Kescari have healers among them. Our treaty is such that we protect and avenge their people in exchange for services like healing and mending."

"It's not my place to say, I know that. But in my world, honor will and does yield to serious blood loss."

"Then I need remind you that we are *not* in thy world. For in

this one, honor counts for all. Is that not so?"

Blackthorn and Ironwood traded an uneasy look. Hollyhock cleared her throat before she spoke. "We all know how much honor means to you, father."

At that, Shaw fixed his three children in a leonine glare.

"Then before all eyes under the Eternal Sky, why doth thy brothers *dishonor our pride?*"

That shocked me to the core. I knew in my bones that the last thing I wanted was to be in the middle of a family dispute – especially one where any member could tear me to pieces in three seconds, tops. But the words came out before I could help myself.

"Shaw, what do you mean?" I cried. "I was here too. I didn't see anything dishonorable with the way this battle was conducted."

"That is because thou knowest little of our ways," he said, in a surprisingly gentle manner. "Honor comes from the ultimate test in combat: between one's abilities and thy opponent's. Gaining victory by this 'Way of the Serpent'? It is underhanded. It is sly. It is–"

Ironwood broke in. "It is effective. I developed this art. I teach it."

"Do not remind me of thy perfidy! Griffins fight with beak, with talon, with wing! Doth we rely upon the part of our bodies most like a *wyvern* now?"

It didn't take a 'click' in my head or anything, but at least I finally figured out the problem. The 'Way of the Serpent' that Shaw objected to made use of the griffins' surprisingly flexible tails. I noticed that five of the remaining eleven griffins wore steel tips at the end of their tails. The five included all three of Shaw's offspring.

"Be reasonable," Hollyhock pleaded. "I know the objections of the Elders. They would not listen, but Ironwood speaks the truth. Splitting the focus of the enemy forces them to choose between following our talons or our tails. It is a key advantage we cannot throw away. We only lost one warrior today. In the olden days, we could have lost an entire lance."

"The victory wouldst be ours, nonetheless!"

"How can you be so blind, father? Would you have more of us

die for your 'honor'?"

"Were it up to me?" Shaw roared. "We would *all* die before we gave up our honor!"

Hollyhock stared back defiantly. The remaining griffins looked away uncomfortably or tended to their wounds with extra care for a few moments.

"It is good that we know each other's thoughts," Ironwood sighed. "It is time that we return home."

My eyes lingered on the fallen griffin's mangled remains. "Are you going to do anything with Cloudburst's body?"

With a shake of her head, Hollyhock answered. "She is not there anymore. Her body returns to the Eternal Sky on its own, as it should."

I looked to Shaw. Without further comment, he presented his flank towards me. I'd gotten over most of my fright, though I still had a distinctly queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. But given Shaw's still-agitated state, I guessed that silence would be best for now. I climbed into the saddle and did my best to ignore the claw mark that zig-zagged down the center of the saddle where I had to rest my crotch.

Shaw's preoccupation with his children's misdeeds ended up working in my favor. He took to the air smoothly, kept his wing beats measured, and flew low and level towards the southwest. The beach fell away, as did the smells of blood and fear. They were replaced by the clean scents of pine and griffin musk as the lances linked up around us, putting Shaw and me in the heart of their new formation.

The land grew more and more rugged. The sun slid down to the west, but before it could shine into our eyes, steep mountain peaks off to the right reared up and blocked the worst of the glare. To the left, the sandy beach disappeared and the sea chewed at the forest's edge, slowly eating its way into the mass of deep green.

We flew above a large, finger-shaped wedge of land that narrowed in the distance to a mist-shrouded hump of rock. To either side, the sea crashed and boomed against a shoreline made of sharp gray stone. The briny smell of the ocean became stronger than the

pine and musk scents.

A dish-shaped plateau appeared below. Stuck into its very center was a tall wooden post, painted an eye-frying shade of scarlet. The post itself had been carved into the shape of a double-headed griffin.

“Look there,” Shaw said, in something closer to his normal jovial rumble. “That is thy border marker. A path shows yon way through the tumbled valleys ahead.”

Sure enough, a windblown little road marked at intervals with smaller red posts wound its way through the tangled woods. I followed it as far as I could with my eyes towards the horizon. The mists parted, allowing the sun to reach the hump of rock I’d seen in the distance.

The light turned the stony mass into a sparkling dazzle, the shapeless hump transforming into a massive wave of marble, forever frozen at the very moment it crested. Ivory whites and slate grays were shot through with veins of icy blue rock and glittering streams of silver – some made of mica, others of actual water as it condensed from the mists and dripped to the forest below. All the air between the lances and the steep backside of the wave echoed with the calls of griffins as they plied the air on giant feathered wings.

My voice failed me. It took me a few moments to try again.

“Is that…” I asked, in a near-whisper.

“Thine eyes see true,” Shaw said, his voice as quiet as mine. “There lies the griffin aerie. My home.”

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Chapter Sixteen

We banked to the right to approach the aerie from the northwest. Several times I tried to work up my voice to speak again, but my brain kept jamming up with the amazing sights that I'd never dreamed of.

The backside of the giant marble mountain made a steep, rounded slope all the way around to the western side. The marble itself was carved up into twelve horizontal levels, each scraped or carved from the stony face of the slope. A wide gravel path and a space of about twenty near-vertical feet separated each level. Each level was in turn divided up into rectangular spaces bordered by crude stone walls like the kind I'd seen in Scotland to separate herds of sheep.

At first glance, the levels and their rectangular slabs of space reminded me of terraced fields of rice. In fact, the multiple levels of gray and silver-white stone made me think of one of the big cities from The Lord of the Rings movies. Try as I might, I couldn't pry the name out of whatever memory I'd stashed it in.

Then, as I watched three griffins land in a trio of adjoining spaces my brain finally did its *clicking* thing. I realized that these were communal roosts of a sort, rather similar to the ones used by the owls of Parliament. But where the owls used a single wooden structure, the griffins mimicked cliff-nesting birds like kittiwakes or puffins. Each stone-bracketed section was an individual 'home' or 'nest', much like studio apartments in the older parts of downtown Los Angeles.

Of course, these 'apartments' didn't have much in the way of furniture, to say nothing of a roof. But to the avian griffins, what was a roof but a nuisance blocking easy access to the sky? The three who had landed seemed happy enough. Each settled into an oval twig-and-branch nest set in a corner of their abodes and began preening their fur and feathers with their beaks.

The slope flattened out below the lowest level of griffin

dwellings and turned into a series of small beaches made up more of boulders and twisted driftwood than sand. The pounding of the waves grew louder as Grimshaw descended. We approached a stony spit jutting out at the point furthest west. Spray drenched the rocks as we came in for a landing. A pair of gray-furred griffins waited patiently nearby. They wore Andeluvian-style chest plates and elaborate metal helmets studded with blue or red gems.

"Looks like someone sent the palace guard to greet us," I remarked, as I slid off Shaw's back.

"Nay, Dayna, not guards," Shaw said. "Thou espies two of the Elders. There is little enough a griffin must fear, let alone one of the Nine."

"So there are nine on the Council."

"The Elders are eight in number," Shaw clarified. "The High Elder, who ranks the others, is the Ninth."

Ironwood and Hollyhock went forward and spoke with the two Elders. I couldn't make out the words over the beating of the surf, but I did catch a nod of assent. That was followed by the comical sight of the two older griffins craning their necks around Shaw's kids to get a curious glimpse of me.

"Blackthorn," Hollyhock called. "Take our wounded to the healers. Bring the rest of the lance to await us at the second parapet."

The massive griffin cawed in response and took off with a single massive beat of his wings. The remaining warriors of the lance followed suit, though the wounded lifted off more unsteadily. Without further ceremony, the two Elders turned away from us and walked back towards the sheer face of the mountain. Hollyhock and Ironwood did so as well. I threw Shaw a puzzled glance. He shrugged, then indicated that we should follow.

I leaned back for a moment to look up as we approached the sheer rock wall. Overhead hung a silvery-gray lip of stone, forever frozen in space. I lowered my gaze and focused on a jagged vertical fissure ahead of us. From a distance, it appeared to be a mere crack, a lightning-bolt shaped flaw in the mountain. Up close it yawed open to reveal a passage wide enough to admit a single pair of griffins walking

side by side. The boom of the waves picked up a pulse-pounding echo as we passed the threshold. The cool wetness of the air inside draped itself over my skin like a damp terrycloth robe.

The entryway snaked back and forth as we bore deeper into the fastness of the Elders. Multiple side passages loomed out of the shadows and then fell behind as we progressed. Most of the side-tunnels were silent, though from a couple I clearly heard waves breaking on gravel.

I realized that the interior of the griffins' mountain was a vast shatter zone of cracks, passages, and natural caverns. All along our way, I didn't spy any of the fixtures I'd gotten used to seeing in Fitzwilliam's palace. No torch holders (or torches, for that matter). No doors, stone lips to the entryways, or even decorative paint. Save for smoothing out the floors, the griffins had left the natural rock untouched.

"Where are we going?" I asked Shaw, my voice a whisper in the dim light.

"The Lair of the Elders," Shaw intoned solemnly, as if that answered everything. "Bide a moment. We draw near."

The passageway grew lighter. Suddenly, we stepped into a space so wide and bright that it felt as if I'd fallen into it. Blinking, I looked around owlishly, taking in the sights.

The 'Lair of the Elders' was something straight out of a barbarian or caveman epic. A vast egg-shaped cavern wrapped around us in smooth flanks of ochre and gray-banded stone. Needle-sharp stalagmites and matching stalactites as long as I was tall and as thick as my legs projected from floor or ceiling in spots, glinting evilly. Irregularly shaped passages or cracks punctuated the walls.

Overhead was the largest opening of all: a wide crack that spanned most of the cavern's length and illuminated the space below like the Mother of All Skylights. The cavern itself was large enough for several dozen griffins to make themselves comfortable, and about half that many could have spread their wings to take off. That is, save for the grid of heavy chains that hung forty feet above. The chains were suspended from a wicked-looking set of iron spikes that had been

hammered into the walls.

The chain links had turned a dark shade of red rust from the salt air. Something about the way the grid hung in spots made me squint harder at it. Nightmare shapes were wrapped or tangled in the iron net, suspended in the shadows, and my brain couldn't quite register whether I was looking at a grotesque set of sculptures or leather-wrapped mannequins.

My group came to a halt facing the center of the huge room. The two helmet-wearing griffins climbed atop a pair of swirl-patterned boulders and turned to face us. We waited a moment, then new sets of fierce leonine eyes gleamed one-by-one from the dark spaces of the room. Winged feline shapes made their way to a stony perch, staring down in judgement.

Several wore helmets and breastplates, the metal glinting in the dim light. Others were bare, though their fur and feathers were as steely gray as armor plate. The one who clambered to the highest outcrop of rock was the youngest looking, at least at first glance. This particular griffin had a baby-powder white coat with the black rosette markings of a snow leopard.

A series of low caws echoed through the cavern from the assembled griffins. As best I could figure, this meant 'approach'. Ironwood stepped up to speak.

"Hail to thee, drakes and reeves of the Elder Roost," he said, his voice ringing in the cavernous space. "We bring the one who is known to all as–"

"Enough!" A high-pitched voice, teetering on the edge of shrillness, cut Shaw's son off in mid-sentence. "Wouldst thou lecture thy elders, pup? Let Shaw's rider step forth 'ere I grow peeved. Let me see her with mine own eyes."

"As you decree." Ironwood dipped his head in acquiescence. Looking over his shoulder he made an all-too recognizably human gesture with his lion's paw to come and join him. "Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels, I bid thee: Come forth and receive the wisdom of High Elder Belladonna of the Reykajar Aerie."

I swallowed hard and stepped forward. Fitzwilliam's court

could be intimidating, but there was still a human element that I could easily grasp. Dealing with Xandra and the owls was more difficult, but the problem in that case was mere language and stonewalling. Here, in the Lair of the Elders, there was a barbaric atmosphere to the place, the clink of talon on stone, metal on rock, the feeling that any single member of the Council could have me served up for a light snack.

Take it easy, I told myself firmly. *This 'Belladonna' won't be so bad. Remember Thea?*

I cast my mind back. When I'd first laid eyes on the Albess of the Owls, she'd looked so stern that I'd envisioned her contemplating how a chunk of my earlobe would taste. Instead, her first few words had put me at ease, revealing her true, warm nature.

Belladonna leapt from the highest outcropping and landed before me with a flutter of her wings. The High Elder had sleek white fur an Angora cat would have envied, dappled with perfectly groomed black spots and rosettes. But her snowy wings sported dozens of feathers that stuck out at odd angles. Her head was fringed with so many out-of-place feathers that she looked less like a proud eagle and more like a bedraggled secretary bird.

Belladonna wore a beaded headdress that had been strapped or braided to her skull, complete with silver circlets that dangled on either side like hoop earrings. One of her piercing black eyes focused unerringly on me. The other wandered off to the side, tracking a reflected spot of light cast by one of the silvery circles. Her beak, tipped with yellow and shading towards bloodshot red up by her eyes, gave a series of spasmodic twitches.

Half of the good feelings I managed to conjure up melted away.

Okay, I thought, backpedaling a little, *Maybe she only looks crazy.*

"So," the High Elder hissed. "The speck of corruption in mine eye is revealed at last. Speak of the treachery thou dost plan to befoul our home with, lest I send you to join the ranks of the Skinned Ones!"

Well, that did it.

The remaining 'good feelings' I had built up for myself vanished

without a trace.

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Chapter Seventeen

"Your, ah, High Elderness…" I began semi-coherently. "I am here as an envoy of King Fitzwilliam–"

That was as far as I got before Belladonna lunged forward, her razor-sharp yellow beak coming within a few inches of my face. It took all my control not to flinch as she sniffed the air around me, made a 'huff' of disdain, and strode back to her initial landing spot.

"Do not waste thy breath on false greetings," she said, in her scratchy, high-pitched voice. "Even thy *smell* is one of treachery! Upon thy brow I scent scales and blood, blood and scales!"

This was *definitely* not turning out the way I had been hoping. Alarmed, I turned to Shaw and pleaded with my eyes for a little help. To his credit, he stepped to my side and quickly spoke up.

"Dayna Chrissie hath joined us but recently in battle," Grimshaw pointed out. "Eldest, the scents thy nose detects are from this afternoon's contest of thine lances against the wyverns."

That tidbit of information went over like a lead balloon.

"Wyverns!" Belladonna spat. "So quick to confession! Outworlder, thy conspiracy with yon wyverns seals your fate. Thy body shall indeed be welcomed among the Skinned Ones!"

This time I caught the expression of one of the Elders who'd escorted us inside. He rolled his eyes in a way that clearly said: *Here she goes again.*

I wasn't finding this the least bit funny, however.

Shaw sputtered. "Nay, Eldest! It was I who brought her to that contest."

"So quick thou art in replying, so quick! Art thou *in league* with this outworlder and her wyvern allies?"

"This outworlder saved my life," Hollyhock said, stepping up next to her father. "From the aforementioned flock of wyverns, yet. Why would one in league with them do such a thing?"

"Thou hast freighted more dishonor than all the griffins here,"

Belladonna shot back. To my surprise, Shaw's daughter flinched. "Even one just out of the egg could see that this was a ruse, a stratagem most foul, to gain your trust!"

"Something around here is certainly foul," I muttered under my breath. Luckily, Belladonna didn't hear me as she worked her way up to a right high dudgeon. Her out-of-kilter eyeball randomly wandered around the room as she strutted back and forth.

She addressed the room at large. "I have told thee! I have told thee that I have seen blood and peril in mine own visions! The war of eons past yet stirs. The dream horses sow the seeds of their fall. The humans dwell upon the bones of their nemesis. The owls imprison the sacred as they move on silent wings, ready to strike. The greatest of the dragons passes into realms beyond the sight of all. Creatures of the fey and the rock scheme our destruction, whilst one who might yet save us lies beyond the light of the hearth. And here! Here we are attacked from without and subverted from within, and all our kind sit by, gormless and weak, letting his outworlder beguile us!"

My breath caught for a second. Maybe it was all nonsense. But…if there was anything to her rantings, Belladonna had just scattered a fistful of gems in front of me. I wished that I could've sat down and looked at each of her statements in detail. But I had to put a stop to this before it got out of hand.

The High Elder may or may not have been plain nuts, but she had a streak of paranoia wider than her wingspan. Everything she was told to validate my innocence got put into her mental feedback loop that I was guilty of collaborating with some shadowy enemy.

I couldn't back down now. Aside from needing to solve the crime in question, my entire presence in Andeluvia was on the line. But how was I going to…

My mind did one of its weird little *clicks* just then.

It couldn't be that simple, could it?

I swallowed, hard. As soon as Belladonna paused in her ranting to take a breath, I stepped into the gap with something I'm sure no one was expecting.

My confession.

“Eldest!” I shouted. “I must congratulate you. You have indeed scented my ruse, as I attempted to gain access to your aerie for the enemy’s nefarious purposes.”

Belladonna blinked. Both of her eyes seemed to settle down and focus on me for the first time. Her voice ratcheted down from its earlier screech.

“Thou hast brought congratulations for me?”

“Of course. It can’t be easy, being the only one who sees truly and wisely.”

“Thou art right! ‘Tis a burden beyond belief to have one’s decisions taken with surly glances and words.”

I risked a glance back. My companions each looked as if I’d hit them full-on with a flash bulb. Shaw’s beak hung half-open in shock. I stiffened my back along with my resolve to play this out the rest of the way.

Well, in for a penny…

“Then I stand before all as living proof of your wisdom,” I went on. “I am indeed working for those you have seen in your visions.”

“The old war doth stir…”

“Like water in a simmering pot, High Elder. One which is soon to boil over. Which is why you need to let me do what I came here for.” I took off my traffic cone colored backpack and pulled out one of the buccal brushes. “I mean to examine your warriors with devices like these. They’re to help ensure that only the healthiest griffins serve with King Fitzwilliam’s Air Cavalry.”

Belladonna cocked her head, making her earrings jangle. “But that does not serve thy underlying purpose, does it?”

“Of course not, Eldest,” I said, spreading my hands. “You have found me out.”

“Ha! Another plot have I uncovered! Then what is thy ultimate goal?”

“Oh, I can’t say. Anything I told you would be a lie, of course. Which is why you must allow me to look at each of your warriors as soon as possible. Otherwise, how will you learn the truth?”

“Of course,” she breathed. “Since all you speak is falsehood, I

must have thee kept under guard as closely as possible whilst thou attempts to enact thy plans!"

"Curses," I sighed. "You have foiled me again."

"But who can I trust with overseeing thy machinations? I must cudgel my brain to decide…"

"No cudgeling needed, Eldest." I pointed at the various members of the Elder council around me. "Any of these fine griffins will do. After all, they sit only slightly behind your greatness, do they not?"

"They do! And whilst they wish to replace me, they lack mine own singular vision!"

"It is unique, I'll give you that."

"Since you choose them, it might be that they are in league with your plans." Belladonna gaze fell on Shaw's daughter again. "Yet this young one…thou had tried to gain her trust. That means she must *not* be part of thy plan yet. Since she has not fallen under thy sway, then she can be trusted to watch over thee."

Hollyhock looked one part confused and two parts shocked, but she kept quiet as the Eldest jabbed a talon towards her. Apparently, Belladonna had already forgotten the insult she had casually tossed her way.

"True Born daughter of Grimshaw, I charge thee with guiding and watching this Dark One. I have great need to find out her true purpose here, so should she come to harm, it will go hard – very hard! – on thee."

Hollyhock knelt. "I shall perform thy task to my utmost."

"Then I shall leave thee to it, for I grow tired. This struggle with the evil in mine own demesne is taxing, and I do not wish to be disturbed for the rest of the day."

With that, Belladonna the High Elder unfurled her bedraggled wings. With a quick double beat, she returned to the upper levels of the cavern and slipped away into the darkness. Murmurs came from all around as the griffins remarked on her latest orders, though only in low tones.

I let out a breath and ran the back of my hand across my

forehead. It came away damp with sweat. Hollyhock moved around to my side so that she flanked me along with her father before she spoke in similarly soft tones.

"That was…unexpected."

"Which was?" I asked. "The High Elder's rantings, or my response?"

"Both, in truth. Though Belladonna has always flown more than a little off trim."

Shaw let out a squawk before he added, "Nay, never like this. I like this not. 'Tis only luck that Dayna's forebears are human, not griffin. None of us could have bent meaning like that, not without loss of honor."

"That's why I'm glad she didn't ask you for corroboration," I said honestly.

"Aye, that is true."

"Then I must ask," Hollyhock said, "If I am to be your guard and guide, what is your true aim, if not to survey the 'health' of our warriors?"

Shaw traded a glance with me. As much as it might alienate me from his daughter, every griffin had to be considered a suspect for the theft in Los Angeles. Regretfully, I shook my head.

"Thy need to know is not as great as our need for secrecy," Shaw said.

Hollyhock gave me a newly appraising look. "Then perhaps Belladonna has struck in the gold for once, and you are in league with forces aligned against us."

"Do not speak like that, even in jest! While Dayna's cleverness has worked its will for now, the High Elder's mind is striking at shadows. What will happen when Dayna's task is done, and she no longer needs to watch and wait?"

"That's a bridge I hope to cross when we get closer to it," I said, and I felt Galen's silver amulet like a warm coin against my skin. "At least I have access now. And a way home, if all else fails."

"Be grateful of that. Otherwise one might well indeed join the ranks of the Skinned Ones."

Shaw looked up at the network of chains that hung above the cavern like an industrial-themed trellis. My gaze followed his. I frowned, trying to figure out what he meant.

Suddenly, my mind finally understood what it was seeing. The nightmare shapes tangled in the lattice of iron chains snapped into focus. The twisted, dried chunks of flesh still seemed to writhe in agony. My legs shook as I made out a half-dozen eyeless skulls, limbs punctuated with jutting nubs of bone, and the horrible beef jerky-like quality to the desiccated muscles. Five of the figures were long-since flayed griffins.

And one of the figures had been a human.

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Chapter Eighteen

I'd seen corpses in various states of decay in my career. As far as the flayed figures in the chain-link rafters went they were fairly well preserved, in a leathery sort of way. Up close, I'd expect them to rank no higher than a two on the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending). Yet those six bodies sent a chill down my spine. It was a quick reminder to Miss Slow Learner here that for all its glories, Andeluvia had some very dark aspects.

"I sense that thou hast misgivings," Shaw rumbled in my ear. "All griffins who see the Skinned Ones feel the same way, for that is what they are meant for. We have few formal punishments, save for this one: the flaying and display of those who have given in to dishonor so grave that it threatens us as a people."

My throat was dry for a moment. It was a reminder that Andeluvia played by its own set of rules. Even King Fitzwilliam, who eschewed capital punishment when he could, still had a working dungeon and medieval interrogation equipment for his use.

The chamber quieted around us as the remaining Elders slipped back into the shadows, presumably to return to their quarters or to continue doing whatever they did during the evening hours. Ironwood spoke briefly to Hollyhock and also took his leave.

I nodded towards the Skinned Ones. "What did these six do? Did they anger High Elder Belladonna?"

"Nay, Dayna. These date from far before her time."

"That's encouraging, at least."

"As it should be," came a new voice. A griffin with fur and wings the color of his steel helmet and breastplate approached us. Blood-red garnets speckled the edges of his armor, and the mark of a long-ago wound wended its way along one half-crumpled ear.

"Elder One," Grimshaw intoned. He and Hollyhock lowered their heads in a slight bow as the older male approached. I inclined my head and followed suit as best I could. A pause, and I felt the

gentle pressure of a paw on my shoulder.

"Be at ease, Dayna Chrissie. I am Elder Ulrik. Our people do not summarily execute a nation's envoy, no matter what the High Elder may say in her less-than-lucid moments. Also, Grimshaw hath spoken at length about thy adventures." With an annoyed tone, Ulrik added, "I mean to say: Grimshaw *has* spoken at length about *your* adventures. Apologies. It takes time for an Elder's mind to bridge the span between the old generation's speech and the new."

Shaw gave Ulrik a look. "'Twas nothing wrong with thy speech before."

"And yet it shows how we cling like mewling chicks to our past," Ulrik insisted. "Not the future, which is what we need to care for and encourage, lest it creep up on us unexpectedly. It is why I have spoken up on behalf of Hollyhock and Ironwood, and received rebuke from my peers in exchange."

"You have my gratitude," Hollyhock chimed in, with a ruffle of her feathers. "It is good to know that some of us feel the winds of change when they blow."

I listened closely, aware now of a repeated pattern of discord. This was the second time I'd witnessed a generational clash of 'old' and 'new'. Despite looking all one and the same from the outside, I sensed a good number of things roiling underneath the surface of the griffin culture.

"Regardless of what Belladonna thinks, I do have a job to do," I said, holding up the buccal brush again. "All I need to do is swab this device along the inside of each of your warriors' mouths. That part shouldn't take more than a few seconds. Then I return to my world to use our own form of 'magic' to look for possible health problems. The whole process might take a few days, at most."

Ulrik squinted from beneath the brow of his helmet at the little brush. "If it can do as you say, that will be a help to us. There are always far more warriors who wish to serve Fitzwilliam's Air Cavalry than there are openings. Your method should keep the number of honor duels for the spots to a minimum."

"Whatever I can do to help." In truth, that hadn't been

anywhere near my list of considerations, but if it helped keep an Elder on my side, so be it.

"Your mention of battle fitness has brought to mind the wounded from my lance," Hollyhock said. "My Captain has already seen fit to join our brother at the Place of Healing. I should be there as well."

"Fly well," Ulrik agreed, and Hollyhock backed out of our conversation with a low bow. She hurried out the same tunnel that Ironwood had taken. As soon as she departed, the Elder nodded towards an upward sloping passageway. Shaw and I walked along with him as he continued to speak. "Many of our warriors are yet abroad. Yet luck still holds, Dayna Chrissie. Four days from now, we of the Reykajar Aerie shall celebrate the Rite of the Autumn Winds. Unless we or our allies are in a state of war, all griffins are to return here."

The way we traveled along opened up as the slope increased. Once again, side tunnels spiraled off to unknown depths that echoed with the murmur of wave action. Ahead, the light of the setting sun beckoned us towards the end of the passage.

"'Twould be easy for such as I to organize the warriors here to begin seeing you for examinations," Shaw added. "But the sun draws nigh to setting, and I fear to disrupt the evening hunts."

I did a quick mental calculation. "It's Wednesday evening right now in my world. I took the next day off, so I could start tomorrow morning."

"What of the day after that? 'Twas my understanding that in your world, one works five days in a row."

"I have to be in on Friday, sure. But no one stuck me with the weekend shift, so that gives me Thursday and Saturday to get a good head start on the tests, finishing up when the remaining griffins return for your ceremony."

Ulrik nodded. "It is settled, then. My advice would be to use the open space 'round the trader's cabin for your work. 'Tis…I mean, 'it is' one of the few large open spaces here."

With that, we emerged from below into the cool red-gold

sunshine of the evening. The stillness of the air vanished, to be replaced with the steady salt-scented ocean breeze. I let out a low whistle as I took in the panorama before us.

The passageway had turned into a broad road whose borders were marked with colored bits of banded agate and paved with pink and gray crushed seashells. The path sloped steeply down and away from us, curving through openings in the different levels of open-topped griffin apartments and disappearing into the green haze of forest far below. We'd come out on the rear slope of the stony mountain that made up the aerie, rather like a bunch of surfers who'd let a wave's swell pass underneath.

Ulrik and Shaw showed me down the slope towards a squat, rectangular building. Though it was a fairly standard-looking cabin with stone walls and a flat wooden roof, here in the griffin's realm it looked positively alien. To my surprise, the cabin's entire front wall opened like a king-sized set of French doors on a pair of squeaky iron hinges.

The heady scent of pine needles, smoked meat, and leather greeted me as I stepped inside. Round windows covered in animal skin punctuated each wall. The walls themselves were lined from floor to ceiling with wide wooden shelves. Aside from a thin layer of dust, the shelves were completely empty. Next to a bare hearth sat neatly bundled cords of timber, a pile of kindling, and a quartet of crude benches. Wicked looking hooks protruded from high up on the walls. It took me a couple of seconds to figure out that these were for hanging hammocks.

"Almost every year, the aerie hosts Andeluvian or Kescari traders," Shaw explained. "While thy kind prefers a different kind of dwelling, this seems to suffice for the merchants."

"I can't complain," I said honestly, as I took off my pack. "It's kind of homey, in an abandoned hunting lodge sort of way."

Ulrik gave Shaw a puzzled look. Shaw shrugged in reply. Luckily, the Elder was too engrossed in watching my next activities to inquire further.

I unzipped my pack and found a handy shelf to set out some of

my cooking supplies, a vacuum-packed plastic bag full of 'rough travel' clothes, and a first aid kit. Then I unrolled my air mattress – a strawberry-colored lozenge of plastic dotted with duct tape patches. I checked the mattress' power pack to ensure that I had a fresh pair of batteries installed, and then flicked the pump switch to 'on'. The two griffins' eyes went dinner-plate wide as a raspy *buzz* filled the cabin's interior and the air bed expanded like so much rising dough.

"What strange magic your world must possess!" Ulrik breathed. He cautiously extended a forepaw and poked at the now plump end of the mattress. Luckily, the Elder had his lion's claws retracted, or my world's most interesting magic item would have unceremoniously popped and deflated.

"Thou hath not seen the half of it!" Shaw chuckled.

"Indeed! Then I shall take my leave of you, Dayna Chrissie. And take care: should you depart from the aerie, you must adhere to the law regarding how you may return. No magic is allowed. Grimshaw can meet you at our border as per your needs."

"I shall follow the law to the letter." Ulrik bowed to me, and I clumsily followed suit. But my vow for honesty bothered me a little, and I couldn't help but speak up one more time. "I do need to level with you about one thing, Elder One."

In response, the older griffin's eyebrow raised in question. I hurriedly went on.

"While I will be checking your warriors' health, there is an additional goal I have to keep close-mouthed about for now. Grimshaw will vouch for my need, and that I only have the best interests of the griffins in mind."

The older griffin considered. "If such a hero as Grimshaw vouches for you, then I am satisfied."

Another knot of tension I'd been holding in my back unraveled. "Thank you. I'm just glad that you don't think that I'm here to subvert anything."

Ulrik's golden eagle eyes held mine for a moment, then danced with merriment as he let out a squawk of a laugh. "Do you take me for a just-hatched chick? One who has tumbled from his nest and landed

upon his head? I shall save the conspiracy theories for dear Belladonna."

"That does seem to be her realm of expertise."

"Oh, aye. Ever since the supposed coming of the dragon Sirrahon, our High Elder has been speaking of demons locked in stone, of owls and secrets and beings that dwell in the dark."

"You…don't think there's any merit to this?" I asked carefully.

"Nay, and none of the Elders will entertain this foolishness either." He waved a paw in Shaw's direction. "When Grimshaw came to us before, asking advice about dragons of yore, we tried all day to dissuade her from filling one of our best warrior's head with ridiculousness."

Shaw looked on incredulously. "If it t'were such a foolish matter, why was I charged with an oath of blood and talons to stay within the palace's demesne until I spoke with the Albess of the Owls?"

"Because the Albess is wise, because she is discreet, and most importantly, she is an *owl*," Ulrik declared. "The owls are known throughout our lands to be the most difficult to understand, so no one truly tries. Any scrap of nonsense she told you would scarcely be taken seriously by anyone in power!"

"But…Elder One…"

"I know, I know. Enough with this talk of insanity and stories fit for a chick's first night off the cliffs. There is no conflict that can touch us within the fastness of our aerie, let alone one from a time long ago."

Ulrik bid us farewell. If he noticed the stunned look on our faces, he didn't let on. Grimshaw had been mistaken. The leaders of his people hadn't been deliberating about the threat posed by Sirrahon, or the dark forces that may have been behind the dragon's return. All but one of the Elders thought the entire notion was pure fantasy.

And the one that *did* think we were on to something was flat-out insane.

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Chapter Nineteen

It turned out that fighting for one's life in a wyvern-griffin battle was the best cure-all for insomnia ever invented.

Galen's silver medallion had transported me back to my living room. It had done so reliably ever since I'd first been to Andeluvia. That said, it also reliably dumped me on my butt about half the time. So I'd swapped out the ratty sand-colored carpet for a plusher Persian rug with a bulls-eye pattern. The change had reduced the number of bruises I picked up, so I figured that it was worth the extra money.

I put out a change of clothes that included my Angel's baseball cap, a pair of jeans, hiking boots, and my belt-clip mounted OME badge. Next, I set out a pair of saddlebags I'd purchased at the local saddlery shop, linked together with a sturdy black leather strap. Each bag held a hard-pack plastic carrier filled with pre-sealed buccal brush kits. Finally, I'd summoned up the last of my energy to eat a pre-packaged tray of airplane-worthy food straight from the microwave, raise the toothbrush to my mouth afterwards, and crash on my bed, still half-dressed.

Despite the stress of avoiding dismemberment by flying reptiles or flaying by a griffin ruler who'd lost half her marbles, nightmares didn't come to haunt me. In fact, ever since Destry had said that I would have fewer nightmares, my guess is that the *pouquelaye*, the dream horses of lore, had decided to cut me a little slack. But that didn't mean I didn't dream.

In fact, as soon as I woke up and squinted into the bright morning outside my bedroom window, I realized that I'd dreamt of work. That, in and of itself, felt like a bit of a downer. I figured that dreams were meant to be an alternative to day-to-day drudgery, after all. But this one nagged at me like a popcorn kernel caught between my back molars.

Instead of the crunch of hard-packed snow under my little-girl wigwam boots, there was the crisped-rice sound of my stompy gothic

footwear of doom on bits of broken glass. I stood alone under the Hall of Gems' cavernous ceiling. Dust tickled my nose, wind whistled through the saw-toothed edges of the shattered skylights.

The whistling morphed into words hissed in the sibilant, insect-like voice of Rocky, the Old Man of the Mountain, when he'd finally shed his mask and shown his true, evil nature.

You don't see it, do you? It's right in front of you and you don't see it.

"See what?" I asked.

Hector Reyes appeared off to one side, materializing from the haze of dust that billowed into the room like smoke. He held up his camera and shook his head sadly.

"I have to start all over again, again, again," he lamented. A flash, and the exhibits around us rotated in their display cases as if on a set of tumblers. They each turned into faceted stones, glinting and blinding me.

That's when I'd woken up. I found my pillow bathed in a bright stripe of sunlight let in through a crack in the curtains.

I pondered the dream as I ran a loofa brush over my grimy body under a steaming-hot shower. But even supplemented with a dose of Colombia's best from my coffee maker, nothing was going 'click' in my brain this morning. So, I went to check on the contents of my fridge and let out a sigh once I opened the door.

Between picking up camping gear and DNA testing equipment I'd neglected to buy much in the way of breakfast food. Not to mention that I was about to face the upchuck-inducing transport back to Andeluvia. I blew on my coffee to bring it down to a temperature that would only give my tongue first-degree burns, sipped it to the bottom, and went to pick up my gear.

One ozone-scented flash and bang later, I stumbled out onto the circular plateau at the griffin border. I lurched forward, trying to hang on to my saddle bags, until I felt a fur-covered arm come up like a velvet-sheathed bar for me to lean up against. My nose filled with the familiar, sun-warmed smell of feline pelt and eagle feather.

Shaw let out a leonine chuckle. "'Tis not easy to get used to

traveling this way. We must speak soon to our Wizard friend. Mayhap there is a way to make thy medallion spell easier on the innards."

"Yeah, that's not a bad idea," I agreed, as I got my bearings. Off to my left, just over Shaw's broad lion shoulder, stood the vaguely Russian or Roman-styled border marker. And off to the right sat a young female griffin, one with a buzz-cut fringe to the feathers around her head and the tips of her wings. She looked on curiously, poised on her rear haunches as if to move back in a hurry from the strange creature who'd just appeared out of thin air.

"Dayna, thou canst see that I have a visitor." Shaw nodded his head towards the smaller griffin. "This is Linden. She hath undertaken her very first patrol on this day. 'Tis a proud moment."

"I hope to make you proud," Linden said humbly, in a voice that sounded like it should belong to a teenaged girl. She regarded me for a moment longer, then added, "I don't mean to be rude, Day-na. But… where are your wings? Does it take longer for them to sprout on a human?"

That made me smile. Even Shaw looked amused. "I take it that I'm the first human you've met."

"Yes, you are. I came from the egg only after the last trade mission had left."

"Well, sad I am to say, my 'wings' are never going to come in. This is the way we humans look when we reach adulthood."

"Yet…surely you can't have to…*walk* everywhere?"

"That's about the size of it."

Linden gasped. "How horrible!"

"Thou shalt not be unkind to those without our blessings," Shaw said firmly, but in a gentle tone. "Not all creatures 'pon this world are born to fur and feather. 'Tis not their fate."

"Then I count myself lucky to have been fated as such!"

"Aye, true."

A distant caw floated down the breeze. Linden perked up.

"That would be my lance's summons. I must fly."

"Good hunting, young one." Shaw extended a wing and the two griffins touched the feathery tips.

“The same to you, father!” Linden cried, as she took off, circled overhead, and vanished in a flurry of wing beats.

“Father?” I said, dumbfounded. “Shaw, how many offspring do you have?”

Grimshaw thought a moment. He turned one golden forepaw over and muttered as he counted on his talons.

“Time has passed since I last made a survey. I believe sixteen now count me as their named sire,” he said, with a touch of pride. His chest swelled more as he added, “And besides these, you have met the three True Born ones.”

“*Sixteen?*” My mind boggled at that number, even as it still irked me that I didn’t get this ‘True Born’ terminology. “You’re…a busy griffin.”

“Mayhap. Come, we must talk whilst we travel.”

With that, Shaw turned his side to me. I slung the saddle bags over his torso, fixing them in place behind the saddle so that they wouldn’t fall off. Then I got on, suppressing a shiver at my memories of the last flight. I reminded myself that it would be suicidal for any wyvern swarm to get this close to a griffin aerie.

Shaw leapt into the air, wings beating sure and fast to clear the tree line. Yet I noticed that he kept to a lower altitude and a rather sedate speed. Maybe one of his three ‘True Born’ had told him that his human friend looked green around the gills after yesterday’s flight. We banked south and west towards the massive hump of rock rearing on the horizon. The land immediately began to narrow, and the scent of the sea filled my senses again.

“I wouldst not pretend to understand how a mere scrub brush can identify one’s lineage,” Shaw said, with a rather wry undertone that I could hear even over the wind that beat past us. “But I can fathom thy work with prints and scratch marks, at least.”

“I think you’re selling yourself short, but go on,” I encouraged him.

“Thou hadst spoken about marks made by gauntlets. Those are expensive, human-crafted pieces we trade for with King Fitzwilliam’s armorers.”

“You think we should ask Galen to check the Air Cavalry, see what they have in storage?”

“Nay, no griffin in service ever uses such a thing in battle. They are heavy and cumbersome, so they are used as part of our warriors’ training. All of which is performed here at the Reykajar Aerie.”

“So it’s likely that whoever it was came from here, or at least got the gauntlets from here.”

“Aye, mine own thoughts ran that way. These items are kept in the Lance’s Armory, where they can be checked out and returned.”

That made me sit up straighter. “Were you able to speak to the griffins running the armory, then? Maybe we can find out who has been borrowing gauntlets.”

“I did speak to those in charge. Alas, armor pieces may be taken and returned for up to a fortnight. In that time, dozens of griffins have requested armor for training in their various Martial Schools.”

“Still…” I tapped a finger on the saddle in thought. “Maybe we could use a list to narrow down the numbers.”

“A valiant idea, but one that cannot succeed. The armory does not keep records, and the keepers I spoke to cannot remember all the borrowers over a period of nigh on two weeks.”

“They don’t keep records? Are you serious?”

Shaw did his best to throw me an offended look over his shoulder.

“Griffins are an honorable people, Dayna. We do not have a problem with theft, so there is little need to write down who has taken what. All are under stricture of their oath to return said item borrowed.”

“True, my friend. I spoke out of turn there,” I assured him. “I just never thought one of my leads…would be stymied by a culture’s honesty!”

I was rewarded with a griffin chuckle at that. Shaw went on, in a more sober tone.

“Thou must know something else: that I will be leaving you with Hollyhock for the remainder of the day.”

I thought about that for a moment as we drew closer to the aerie. Faint caws and screeches echoed from the clouds around us as we

entered the main flight paths. I certainly didn't mind his daughter's company, but I already felt somewhat removed from my circle of friends without Galen and Liam. This made things all the worse.

"I'm not sure how comfortable I am with that news," I said honestly.

"Mayhap, but 'tis of no import. High Elder Belladonna has charged her with thy keeping, and we cannot gainsay it."

"What will you be doing in the interim?"

My friend let out a sour grunt. "I have been summoned to speak with the remaining Elders about a painful subject: whether or not this thrice-damned 'Way of the Serpent' that Lance Captain Ironwood developed shall be considered dishonorable in the main. I like it not, since I must speak out against mine own blood over it."

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said, redoubling my efforts at stroking his neck. "It looks like we both may have a difficult day ahead of us. But at least it's not combat."

A pained squawk at that.

"Combat I could stand without fear, at least!"

Now that got my attention. As far as I could tell, Shaw was pretty damned close to fearless.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Should a griffin act in such a way that dishonors their entire lineage, then flaying is the *mild* part of the punishment," Shaw said, his voice grave. "Should such a griffin fall into the hands of the Elders, then the dishonor stains the rest of their line. It becomes part of the song of that family's saga, told from then to the line's eventual extinguishment."

"That…sounds pretty harsh. But how can inclusion of a crime into a song lead to a family's demise?"

"Song sagas are the history of a lineage. If it is stained, no one will court or mate with members of said line. Yet I take comfort that Ironwood will likely suffer no more than a rebuke. True dishonor is rare indeed. Thou espied the half-dozen Skinned Ones, correct?"

"Five griffins, one human," I agreed.

"Those are all that have been punished as such in the last few

centuries. Only those five family names have returned to dust."

"And the human?"

"A man of a country long since gone. He lied to Gunnargrim of the now-dead Baldir Pride and used him to gain secrets of the aerie for the purpose of war. For his crime, and Gunnar's willingness to assist, they both joined the Skinned Ones' ranks."

I suppressed a shiver. That sounded just a little too close to the line I'd been pushing with Belladonna. Just like my probation board victory over Deputy Chief McClatchy, I was starting to wonder how much my 'wins' were going to start costing me in the end.

Shaw banked lower, skimming over the first eight ranks of the twelve apartment levels that had been carved or sectioned off along the mountain. Once again I was struck by how the griffins mimicked a cliff-nesting colony of seabirds. We landed along one of the pathways in front of the sectioned-off dwellings. The architecture of the griffin aerie still puzzled and amazed me. Each studio apartment, as I thought of it, lacked a roof, and the walls were little more than rough tumbles of glittery white and gray stone about as high as my chest.

A little way up the slope, I made out the crest of Hollyhock's head jutting up from inside her space. I slipped out of the saddle and gave a little wave. I spoke up so I could be heard over the general noise of griffins going about their daily business, and the ever-present background crash of the waves.

"Hollyhock, we're here!" I called.

Shaw's head whipped around to stare at me. "Dayna, thy tongue shall shame us! Know you nothing of polite society?"

I bit my lip. Leave it to me to mess up some interspecies cultural protocol before I even started the day proper.

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Chapter Twenty

"Um…actually, maybe I don't know what's polite," I admitted. I spread my hands. "I'm sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to."

Shaw's golden eagle eyes suddenly looked downcast. He sounded sheepish as he spoke. "Nay, 'tis I who wronged you. My mind has been cast towards the Elders, when it should have been occupied in teaching you our ways."

I put my hand out to stroke the feathers at the base of Shaw's neck, hopefully smoothing whatever feathers I'd ruffled. Obviously, his daughter hadn't reacted to my hail, and no angry mob of Reykajaran griffins had come flying up demanding I attend finishing school, so whatever I did wasn't beyond saving. But I stayed quiet and kept myself busy removing my saddlebags and slinging them over my shoulder until Shaw worked out what he wanted to explain.

"'Tis a strange thing, now that I see it from the outsider's place," he mused. "Needs I must explain something that springs forth from the nature of mine own aerie."

"I'm all ears."

Shaw's voice was measured, and he motioned both with forepaw and half-unfurled wing as he spoke. "One grows up here in sight of all, Dayna. Nothing to top off our dwellings, and mere half-walls to separate our most intimate moments from where any and all can see in. So, we griffins must view things differently than most, methinks, because of that.

"Where thine eyes see but half a wall, thy mind must create the rest. Shouldst my offspring be sleeping in her nest, neither neighbor to left nor right can tell, for they cannot see through these walls. To pretend otherwise is something most foul, 'ere one breaks into another one's life without consent or welcome."

"Okay," I said slowly. "I think I understand. Right now, if we look at Hollyhock's dwelling, you can't see the very top of her head over the wall."

"Aye."

"You *cannot* see it, or you *will not* see it?"

"To us, one is the same as the other."

Interesting. That was a quirk of a griffin's mental conditioning I'd never heard of. If, as a species, they believed in something enough for a cultural reason, it simply became fact. So even though the griffins soared through the skies overhead, able to look down into any number of apartments at will, in their minds they saw nothing but opaque roof tops. I suppose that someone like myself who insisted on 'seeing' where nothing should be seen would be treated like a peeping tom in this world, or worse.

"I get it. Now that's settled, how do we speak to someone if we don't know if they are even home or not?"

"Why, 'tis simplicity itself: we knock." And with that, Shaw and I walked up the shell-gravel path until he could use his beak to peck a trio of beats on the tumbled stone wall.

"Bide a moment," came Hollyhock's voice, from just inside. I suppose that I could have stood on tip-toes to see if I could glimpse anything over the top edge of the wall, but after Shaw's lecture, I wasn't about to compound my initial mistake. In any case, we only waited a few seconds before his daughter half-leapt, half-flew over her dwelling's outer wall to land next to us. She and Shaw greeted each other by rubbing cheek and neck against each other like a pair of lions out on the African veldt.

Shaw sighed once they completed their gesture. "I conveyed thy charge for the day. Now, I must report to the council, to speak ill of thy sibling, and of the school of martial art thou hast created."

Hollyhock gave him a look. "Are those mixed feelings I hear in your voice?"

"Thou art surprised?"

"After your speech to us yesterday? I thought you'd relish the chance to speak against it."

"Think not of me like that. I dislike the Way of the Serpent, aye. Yet 'tis something new under the sun created by Ironwood, and upheld by you and Blackthorn. It commands my respect, if not my

affection."

As if embarrassed by that admission, Grimshaw bowed to us once more, turned, and launched himself into the air. He vanished into the swirl of fog and individual griffin flights on their various errands of the day. Hollyhock looked bemused. I did my best to keep a straight face. I'd seen the same expression on Galen's face the day his father had taken him back into the family fold.

"More than bone resides under that crown of feathers," Shaw's daughter remarked. "I should know that, but there are times it's easy to forget."

"You won't find me arguing against that," I agreed.

She took the bags I had hanging from my shoulder with her paw. "So, are you ready to use your brushes on my lance, Dragon-Hand? Or do you prefer 'Dayna Chrissie'?"

"I'm ready, but just call me Dayna. Your father does, and he lets me refer to him as 'Shaw'."

"A mark of favor," she said, impressed. "One which I can follow to no less extent, given how you helped me against the wyvern. If you'd like to use 'Holly' for my address, I would not object."

"That works for me."

"Follow me upslope, then," she said, and inwardly I groaned. The mountain was a good deal steeper on this part of the slope. Still, there was nothing to do but shoulder my burden and fall in behind. "By necessity you will be starting with lances that have trained under my Captain, so we need to ascend to our part of the training grounds."

We wended our way up the path, and then over to an even steeper slope. Holly halted, though not for a rest break. Instead, she let me pass and go first.

"Bear to the right," she said, from about three paces behind me. "Worry not! Should you slip, I shall be here to brace or catch you."

"Wouldn't it…" I huffed and puffed, "Be easier just to fly me there?"

"Mayhap. But to my eyes, you appear a bit soft. I think the exertion would do you good."

Another minute, and we continued to ascend towards the lowest

of the wispy cloud layers. Sweat beaded along my brow and I heartily cursed myself for letting my exercise club membership expire.

"Being soft…really isn't that bad," I protested between breaths.

"True. If one is a hare, a hart, or any other animal that can fit down a griffin's gullet," Holly remarked, and I could hear the gentle teasing in her voice. "The curious nature of your form continues to puzzle me. From the rear, I must say you do not look unpleasant. But it doesn't seem that you should be able to walk about properly, let alone do half the things humans are able to do."

Not unpleasant from the rear? I thought. *Well, at least she didn't say that my butt looks fat. 'Soft', or 'curious' I could handle just fine, thank you very much.*

"Linden. She would agree," I said haltingly, as Holly called a quick stop at a flat spot in the trail. "Young griffin I met this morning. With your father."

"I know her, or at least of her. Quite the young reeve, and just out of the shell."

"You call her a 'reeve'?"

"Certainly. Didn't my father teach you some of our terms?"

"He's had other things on his mind. He just explained a bit about how you all protect your personal space, for example."

"Be that as it may, you have earned your rest break. Catch your breath and listen."

"Gladly." I gratefully stumbled my way over to a handy rock and plopped down.

It turned out that although the term 'griffin' was all-inclusive, adult males were 'drakes' and females were called 'reeves'. Beyond that it got more complex, as it involved the stages of hatching, first plumage, first flight, and a bunch of other rituals that depended more on an individual's emotional or physical development as opposed to their chronological age.

There were 'hatchlings' 'or those 'just out of the shell', which to my ear sounded like an infant in the crib. 'Chicks' could walk outside a nest but not fly, so to my mind that seemed like a toddler. Fledglings were yet older, from when young griffins grew their semi-permanent

flight feathers, and then there was the term ‘gryphlet’ which applied to those seeking to join their first patrol.

“Linden said something about just being hatched,” I remarked. “It surprised me a little. I suppose I thought that since griffins have lions’ bodies that you had live…kittens? Pups? Whatever the term would be. Not eggs.”

Holly’s pleasant laugh filled the air again. “That would make no sense, Dayna! Any reeve unfortunate enough to find herself gravid would be unable to fly if she had to carry around young in…whatever you humans use. Some kind of fleshy ‘pouch’, correct?”

My laugh joined hers for that one. I’d liked Holly from the first time I’d met her, and if she wasn’t Shaw, then she was certainly her own griffin. Or ‘reeve’, to be exact. She came to my side and with one wing, pointed towards a cliff much, much higher up the slope. Inwardly, I prayed she wasn’t going to make us hike all the way up there, or I would have to plead for mercy. Or a ride.

“See up there? That is an eggery.”

My face flushed as I recalled Shaw’s lesson. “Are we supposed to be able to see this?”

“Of course. It’s not like we’re looking into someone’s home dwelling.”

With cultural permission given, I craned my neck to see. A half-dozen crags in the rock were jammed next to each other. Two were empty. Sleeping griffins lay in two more, protectively curled around their egg. And a final pair of eggs lay out in plain view as they sat in low oval nests made up of curved branches. The four eggs came in a rainbow of colors. One shone cadmium yellow. Two others were a mix of indigo and white spots. The last held the startling red hue of a freshly dipped candy apple.

“That’s a rarely used, very public place to have your egg,” Holly said, her voice taking on a strange, wistful tone. “For those who want all to know they bore a True Born. All other griffins have their eggs in their home nests, where it is more convenient. More…normal.”

“Then you were birthed – I mean, hatched – up there? In public?”

“My brothers and I, yes.”

She turned away abruptly, ending our conversation. Damn it, I wanted to ask more about whatever this 'True Born' thing was. But unlike Shaw, Holly's moods seemed to shift a great deal more often. She made a motion with her head to follow her up the last stretch of slope. I groaned and picked up my bags.

Ten more minutes of huffing and puffing finally brought us out onto a large plateau tucked in along the north side of the griffin mountain. Natural hollows in the rock had been widened and pressed into service as several small arenas, probably for sparring.

A couple had tiers of rough stone benches, looking like a miniature version of the aerie itself. A quartet of lances sat at something like parade-ground attention on a flat open area to one side. None wore armor, but several of the griffins here had tipped their tails with hard metal spear points, marking them as practitioners of the Way of the Serpent.

Griffins looked naturally tough. As it was, the line of feather, fur, hard muscle, and glinting metal made me think of the times I'd seen the SWAT team getting ready to deploy. Only the SWAT guys didn't look like they could eat you alive in three snapping bites.

Shaw's daughter walked up and down the line, nodding to some of the warriors, complimenting one and murmuring corrections to others. As she did her inspection, I found a handy flat-topped rock to spread out my stack of buccal swab kits, a couple ballpoint pens, and an empty box to hold the collected tests. Using a stern voice, Holly explained who I was, and that I was to use my 'brush magic' to measure their fitness to join the Andeluvian Air Cavalry.

"To that end," she finished, "You will do exactly what she tells you, until you are dismissed in turn. Is that clear, warriors?"

A raucous caw came in reply.

"I'm ready to start," I called.

"Good. I will go first." Holly walked up to me confidently, though her tail swished back and forth, betraying a bit of nervousness. Sitting down, I tore a brush package open and put on the latex gloves included in the kit, then carefully removed the sterile swab.

"Open your mouth, please," I said, and she did so.

I stuck the piece of flocked cotton down past the point of her beak, noting in passing how both upper and lower edges were razor-sharp. It made me feel like one of the show people who put their hands into a croc's mouth. Holly's long pink tongue lay still in a kind of channel between the edges of her lower jaw, and her breath whistled gently past my face. It smelled surprisingly clean. All I could pick up were traces of a thyme-like herb and the brine smell of freshly caught fish.

A quick rub and rotation of the swab for a few seconds ensured that the entire tip made contact with the inside of her cheek. Holly looked at me curiously as I pulled my arm back and tucked the swab into the collection envelope. I uncapped a pen and wrote *HOLLYHOCK* on the line, followed by the date, time, and unique alphanumeric code of the test kit I had just used.

"That is it?" she asked.

"That's it. Not much to it, is there?"

"Not much at all." That seemed to trouble her. "And yet…this magic is powerful enough to tell you who is worthy and who is not?"

"I wouldn't put it quite like that, but in a manner of speaking, yes."

It only took me another twenty-five minutes to take care of the rest of the warriors in the group. None showed a bit of hesitation as I swabbed them and sent them on their way; having seen one of the leaders of a lance take the test probably reassured them. For that, I sent a silent thank-you to Holly.

It was a lot more pleasant performing this test on griffins rather than humans, especially ones who hadn't brushed in a while. Griffins lacked teeth to catch food scraps on, for starters. About the only odor I got from a couple of the warriors' breath was, as with Holly, the clean smells of vegetable matter or very fresh fish.

"And that's the last," I pronounced. "We still have a lot of time left in the day. Let's round up some more griffins and continue testing."

A thought popped into my head: *That was pretty easy. Maybe things are finally going my way for a change.*

"I had to see it for myself," a deep voice boomed from over my

shoulder. “What a pathetic waste of time, subjecting our drakes and reeves to this nonsense!”

Holly all but snarled a reply. “No one asked your opinion, Thundercrack.”

A hulking griffin sauntered up to my makeshift testing station. A jagged scar ran along the base of his beak, twisting the flesh there and his overall expression into a permanent sneer. He sniffed at my gear and then turned his back on me.

“I’ll take my lance into a dragon’s nest,” he announced, “before I let a human sorceress practice her dark arts on me or my warriors!”

I grimaced. Way to go and jinx myself.

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Chapter Twenty-One

As far as I could tell, adult griffins came in three sizes. Large, like Shaw, Holly, or Ironwood. Extra-large, like Holly's brother Blackthorn. And the truly humongous, such as Pride Leader Firewing. Thundercrack looked to be in a size and weight class that fell somewhere between the latter two. Which meant that getting him mad would be like having a flying Sherman tank pissed off at you.

And that looked inevitable from where I stood.

"Look," I said reasonably. "Thundercrack, is it?"

"*Lance Captain* Thundercrack, of the Valkir Pride," he corrected me.

Holly stepped in. "In case you didn't notice, Lance Captain," she pointed out, "Dayna's not one of our kind. Since when has a human been required to follow our unit protocol?"

That point scored. Thundercrack's tail slashed through the air.

"Regardless of that," I pressed on, "I have no dark arts. In fact, I can't do magic. This is just a health examination."

He snorted. "No dark arts? No magic? Word comes on the wind that you have ensorcelled members of Reyka Pride. That they and the Elders themselves have fallen under your power, to take you 'round the aerie, seeking to pry out our weaknesses!"

It took everything I had to keep a poker face at that jab. The cover story I'd had to use with Belladonna definitely had its downside. This was all I needed.

"My pride hasn't been ensorcelled!" Holly flared.

"Really? One wonders who and what has swayed you in past months."

Holly's forepaw clutched unconsciously in the air, as if seeking something hanging around her neck. I thought of the little silver chain I'd seen her wear before. But I needed to nip this in the bud, and fast, or I'd never get to complete my testing. And if there was one thing I hated, it was some idiot getting in the way of my job.

“Everyone knows the amazing things that the Valkir Pride can do,” I said, hoping that this was indeed the case. “Even if I were up to no good, the entire aerie knows they are strong enough to resist any kind of sorcery, do they not?”

“The Valkir are strong indeed,” he agreed warily.

“And are they bound by their honor?”

“As much as any griffin!”

“Good. Then I have a challenge for you.”

“A challenge?” Thundercrack scowled. “I can scarce believe you could provide one.”

“Strength comes in many forms. I believe that you and your pride are strong enough to resist any ‘magic’ I could possess. But I need you to acknowledge that I am stronger than you physically.”

Thundercrack blinked in astonishment. So did the other assembled griffins. It used to be hard for me to read emotions on a griffin’s stern eagle face, but it was getting easier. I was getting a lot of extra practice, after all.

“Let us hear your strength challenge, then.”

“It’s simple. If you can throw a rock farther than me into that part of the ocean,” I pointed north, towards the lee side of the griffin’s wave-shaped mountain, “Then I shall leave without testing your or anyone else’s pride. If I can throw a rock farther than you, then you drop your objections and let me do my testing on your and all the other prides.”

“Done, and touch tips on it!”

“It’s to seal the bet,” Holly said quickly. “Reach your hand out, palm up.”

I did. Thundercrack loomed over me as he approached. His dark gold body and white feathered head made it look like I was about to shake hands with a snow-capped mountain. He unfurled a wing and rapped it against my outstretched hand, making it sting. At the touch, the surrounding griffins broke out into excited murmurs as they departed.

Holly took me aside. “Well, that should travel faster than the wind. Where shall we hold your slaughter? I mean, contest.”

I gave her a look. “You could have a little faith in me.”

Holly lowered her head to murmur in my ear. “Dayna, you can see how large this drake is, correct?”

I smiled grimly. “Size doesn’t worry me so much as smarts.”

Griffins’ beaks had limited motion, so they couldn’t grin, but I got the sense that Holly just did. “Wise words. Mount up so that I may take you where you wish.”

“Can you find me a beach along the north shore? One with more rock than sand?”

She nodded, and with a beat of her wings she took off. Thundercrack followed suit and remained at a distance. My stomach clenched up, expecting the worst, for I didn’t even have the security of a saddle this time. But Holly’s torso was slimmer than Shaw’s, and I could grip her body with my legs a lot more easily. It also helped that she kept her flight reasonably slow and level as we soared over the coastline.

“What you want is just short of the far point, where we landed to meet the Elders,” she said, over the stiff wind. “I will circle it a dozen times. Make sure that my judgement is correct.”

“You have to circle the beach that many times?”

“Not at all. But that will give enough time for as many warriors as can cram themselves into viewing points to arrive. As we say, if you must use up your luck on one attack, put all of your strength behind it.”

“Go big, or go home,” I agreed.

Holly called it correctly. By the time she and Thundercrack landed, the entire rocky slope above the beach was jammed with curious onlookers from elderly gray-furred veterans to spiky-feathered fledglings. They kept their voices low, but an expectant hum, punctuated with the occasional birdlike chirrup of excitement, permeated the air.

“If all here have not heard,” Thundercrack announced, “This human whelp has challenged me to a throw of rocks into the ocean. Distance shall determine the winner. As is our custom, the challenged shall go first.”

With that, the drake grabbed a nearby rock the size of a sofa cushion. He lifted it in one smooth motion as he raised himself to his hind legs. His wings half-unfurled as he pivoted like a shot-putter. I couldn't help but marvel at the definition of muscle in his back and flanks as his golden fur flexed in the sunlight.

He launched his stone in a high arc, winning a cheer from the assembled griffins. I hardly noticed. There, as the sun caught his wings, I spotted a shimmer of green. It came from a pattern of feathers along the underside of his wings. The same shimmer of green one could see on a male peacock's plumage. Only it was toned so far down that the sunlight had to catch it just right to show.

Thundercrack's rock made a mighty *splash* as it plopped into the ocean. There was more cheering, though I heard it as just white noise in the background. My mind had flashed back to what Hector Reyes had said about what his cousin had witnessed in the Hall of Gems.

Whatever it was, it got close enough to him so that all he saw was a blur of colors. White, gold, and green. I asked him twice, he says he saw the color green.

"Dayna!" Holly hissed.

I snapped back to the present, where the assembled griffins looked on curiously. A fledgling with dirty white feathers flapped out over the ocean, landing neatly in the spot where the rock had fallen, bobbing in place, marking the spot. Thundercrack had retreated to the side with a look of idle male smugness.

Well, I was about to wipe that expression off his face. Ever since second grade in Pike County Elementary, I'd regularly win lunches from boys foolish enough to bet against me when it came to skipping stones off the nearby pond. That was why I'd picked the northern side of the griffin aerie – it lay in the lee of the wind that came off the sea on the opposite side. The water was relatively calm and still here. Well, it should have been obvious as to why I asked for a beach with more stones than sand.

Dozens of feathered necks craned to watch me as I wandered around, eyes on the ground. It probably looked like I was just trying to eat up time, delaying my inevitable concession. It certainly must

have seemed like it to the audience, since the murmuring slowly built up in pitch. The smugness radiating from Thundercrack grew even more intense.

But, I found what I was looking for. A flattened triangle of stone about the size of my palm and as heavy as a tennis ball. I let out a breath. A lot lay riding on this little rock; among other things, I damn sure wanted to get a DNA sample from the drake I'd challenged.

I held the stone aloft. Thundercrack dropped his smug look, trading it for a puzzled one. More murmurs, a few shouted caws, and various voices raised themselves in laughter.

"Oh, 'tis a good one! Thou hadst never said how big a stone one had to choose!"

"Nice try, human, but you still can't throw that as far as the drake!"

"Give up now, while you can still cling to honor!"

I got into my stone-throwing position during all of this, cocked my arm, wound up, and released the rock with a quick snap of my wrist. Just like riding a bike, this was one skill I'd never lost. The stone spun out, hit just before the swell of an incoming wave, and then flew out in a flat arc over the water.

The griffins around me went dead silent, holding their breaths, as the stone bounced. Once, twice, thrice, four times. On the fifth bounce, the fledgling marking the spot of the first throw had to lean to one side as the stone skipped on past and then finally sank with a little *plop!*

As one, the drakes and reeves all around the little beach went *wild.*

Cheers, trills and screeches echoed from the cliffs above. It was hard to hear anything for a while. Then, into the middle of the pandemonium, a steel-gray armored griffin flew, hovering above where we'd done the stone casting.

"By the four great winds!" Elder Ulrik swore. "We are trying to hold a council hearing! Take your sparring cheers and noise somewhere else, or Belladonna shall be adding new figures to the chains that hang in the Lair of the Elders!"

With some good-natured jibes in return the crowd broke up,

clearing the headlands above the beach. Ulrik shook his head and soared back to where the council was getting on with their business. Holly simply sat as if rooted to the spot, a bemused look on her eagle face. Thundercrack came up to me, standing close enough to put me completely in his shadow.

"I am honor-bound to accept your win," he said slowly, "Though I think that it was due to the trickery of your kind, nothing more."

"There was no–"

He held up a paw, and I quieted down. "Be still. The high-pitch of your voice rattles my ear. I shall bring my pride to your testing after noon of the next day. That said, I demand a re-match."

I shook my head. "I wasn't playing for two out of three."

"Not with you. With Lance Captain Ironwood and the Reyka Pride."

"A pride-spar match between Reyka and Valkir?" Holly asked, perking up. "Gladly. On the morn of the Rite of the Autumn Winds, at the combat grounds."

"Good. Have the human as your nest keeper."

"As you wish. To the first touch?"

"No, Hollyhock. To the blood."

Holly's eyes narrowed. "You play a dangerous game, drake."

"No more dangerous than yours."

I couldn't help myself; I had to step in again. I felt the situation, which I thought I'd just salvaged, begin to slip away. Plus, my being involved in anything called 'to first blood' worried me. Especially if my blood might be on the line.

"This isn't necessary!" I protested, but this time Holly shushed me.

"It is, Dayna. You triumphed over him, and you did so publically. He must have his chance to win some of his pride's honor back. And you must be there, at least in some small way."

"Aye, it shall be a small way." The scar by Thundercrack's beak writhed as the drake tried to suppress some dark emotion. "I am curious to see how humans fare without their tricks."

"We do just fine," I gritted.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as he said, in a

voice soft and full of menace, “I wonder. I daresay you would not be much without your gun, Dragon-Hand. Or without all the things of metal and plastic and gasoline from your world.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

"You can't give all this up for Andeluvia," Esteban said, smiling in that seductive way he had. "Come with me and see for yourself!"

With that, he doffed his top hat and made a sweeping gesture for me to enter the room. His tuxedo should have looked faintly ridiculous, but somehow he pulled it off. I adjusted my shimmery green evening gown, stepped down out of the pumpkin-shaped carriage and onto the red carpet. Around us swirled a rush of traffic on Hollywood Boulevard, their lights glaring in the evening dusk.

He held the door to the restaurant open. I gasped as I stepped through and my nose filled with the salty brine of the sea. Instead of a conventional interior, I saw the tumbled stone walls of the Reykajar aerie. Griffins swirled around us in a rush, golden eyes gleaming like headlights.

Esteban reclined on a red-and-white picnic blanket. His tux had changed to an LAPD cop uniform. He held up a bottle, wiping the beads of moisture off with his palm as he read the label.

"Tomás' best," he said. "How could you leave me when you have all this?"

He held up a plate of purple berries. They had been pressed somehow, or crystallized. They looked like flat, cut gemstones.

"This…can't be real," I said cautiously, as I sat next to him.

"Nonsense. You just need to see properly!"

The griffin aerie turned into a sun-kissed field dotted with bright blue cornflowers. Esteban plucked one and held it up to me. The intense blue of the flower, shaped like a miniature carnation, pulled me in like the coolness of the ocean depths.

I had to sniff it. Dust from the Hall of Gems puffed out like pollen. My nose wrinkled up and before I could bring my hand to my face, I let out a horrific sneeze.

I woke up back in my own bed.

The alarm wasn't about to ring for another fifteen minutes, so I

shut it off and decided to get ready for work a little early. It never hurt, and sometimes it even gave me the illusion that somehow I'd beaten the other twenty million Los Angelenos to the rush hour.

One shower, clothes change, and cup of java later, I stopped-and-go'ed along the ironically named 'freeway'. My mood was as unsettled as the traffic. Again, I hadn't woken from a nightmare *per se*, but I knew how quirky my brain could get when sending me messages.

It was obvious that something was tickling my subconscious. Telling me that I'd missed a step somewhere. That was all very well and good. But part of me dreaded that I might not figure out what I'd missed until it just a little too late.

With that happy thought, I pulled into a handy parking spot. I pulled out the bag containing my collected swab kits, jammed it under my arm, and headed into the trapezoid of smoky glass that made up the OME building. The carefully sterilized, neutral scent of the gray lobby had been overlaid with the soapy spoor of carpet cleaner, so I held my nose until I got to my office. Someone had taped a note to my door.

Hey there Annie Oakley,
Don't forget: we got targets to shoot at high noon.
See you at the firing range.
Alanzo

That managed to pry the first smile out of me for the day. I peeled off the note and folded it into a pocket as I programmed in a reminder on my phone then jammed my door key in the lock and pushed my way into my office. The mess of paper on my desk had piled up so high that a hamster would have moved out for health code violations. But at least the piles hadn't risen to the level of the Mad Hatter's tea party cookie jar.

I dug around in one of my cabinets until I found a padded envelope for the OME branch of the packaged mail service. Luckily, it was just big enough for the buccal brush samples I'd taken so far to fit inside. With a flurry of pen strokes I put in the mail stop number,

marked it as urgent, then put in my independent contractor's billing code in the payment field. I definitely didn't want the LAPD to be questioning this particular expenditure. I took the package down to the administration area and placed it in the appropriate bin. One of the admin assistants spotted me and waved me down from her cubicle.

"Package just came in for you," she said, picking up a large, bulky box the size and shape of a throw pillow. "And an envelope from Shelly Richardson."

I took the package in one hand; it weighed almost nothing. With the other, I took the inter-office manila envelope labeled *LAB REPORT*. I frowned. Shelly would normally give these to me directly, usually with a helping of down-home Southern advice to go with it.

"She's out sick," the admin added, seeing the question on my face.

"Again?" I asked. "That's the third or fourth time this month alone."

A shrug in reply. The admins had to handle requests and scheduling for the entire department; it was hard for anyone to keep track of everyone. That said, up until now I'd never known Shelly to take a single day off. As far as I knew, she'd never come down with so much as a cold.

I went back to my office, set the box down, and opened Shelly's report first. It was probably my imagination, but even her handwriting looked a little unsteady, as if she'd gone out drinking before putting pen to paper. The results were terse, but clear: the metal shaving I'd found at the Hall of Gems' vault were made of blister steel. Specifically, the kind that matched what we'd found on 'Connor McCloud' when he'd been transported to our world.

So, my hunch was right. Someone wearing Andeluvian steel gauntlets had torn open the vault door.

Next, I turned my attention to the box, which was addressed from the Natural History Museum. I managed to pry it open, reach in, and pull out a pair of ventilation duct filters. Each had been nicely sealed inside a taped-up plastic baggie. Another score for the day.

I settled in to handling the most urgent paperwork with a will for

a while. I'd just finished tagging the baggie set with a lab request form when the phone on my desk buzzed. I had to push aside a couple mounds of paper to get to the receiver, but I managed to get to it by the third ring. A quick glance at the number on the display screen told me it was from the imaging department.

Hector Reyes' familiar voice boomed out over the receiver. "Dayna, it's your favorite shutter bug. Got a minute to come down to the digital lab? There's something here you ought to see. It's from that oddball case we got stuck with."

Yeah, I definitely had a minute for that.

"I'll be right down."

I took a slight detour to put the duct filters into Shelly's sample station downstairs, then made my way to Hector's wing. The photo lab, which everyone called either the 'digital lab' or just 'the digital' was in one of the newer parts of the OME building. The smell of fresh latex paint mixed with new plastic surfaces gave off a faint scent of marker pens. I knocked on the door to the lab, heard a faint *entra* in reply, and pushed my way in.

"Hey, have a seat and check this out," Hector said without ceremony. He sat at one of a pair of faux-leather seats drawn up to an executive-size desk. Perched on said desk was a high-definition monitor larger than my office's window. I took the empty seat as he typed a few commands into the keyboard to blip the film back to his starting point.

"Sweet setup you have here," I observed. "I'd love to watch a movie on this gear."

A knowing chuckle. "Believe me, I've been tempted to try an online game with this thing, check out a little of what my son is playing. But no dice."

"Yeah, I think the LAPD would object."

"That, and the fact that kids these days have trigger reflexes like no one's business. It'd be a massacre for old folks like me, who're pushing thirty-five." He finished typing in a couple of extra commands, then added, "This security camera footage actually arrived yesterday afternoon, but I had to transfer the tape to our kind of

digital media, which took some time."

"They actually used physical tape?"

"Nobody does that anymore, thank goodness. Just an old term we all still use. But the hardware they use is old. Couldn't view the stuff they sent until I copied it into a file format our machines can recognize. I don't think it affected the quality at all. That's a good thing, because this half-minute of tape is difficult enough to believe without additional distortion."

With that, he set the film in motion. The vast oval shape of the Hall of Gems appeared, dimly illuminated by the after-hours lighting. Given the downward slant of the viewing angle, the security camera must have been installed above a doorway or below a second-story landing. I could clearly see the exhibit cases and, about sixty or seventy yards across the hall, the vault door to the 'phantom quartz' crystal exhibit. Off to the right I was just able to make out signs promoting the about-to-open sapphire display.

"There's Tomás doing his rounds," Hector noted. For a couple moments, a cap-wearing man pushing a cart laden with cleaning supplies appeared at the lower left edge, then vanished off screen. "And…here's where it gets interesting."

The image shook as a shattering *boom* echoed throughout the hall, followed by the unmistakable, jangling cascade of shattering glass. Tomás let out a scream, which was echoed by a loud screech that could have come from an eagle the size of a small aircraft.

Next came a blur of images and sounds.

A shimmering blast of glass particles was blown as if by a fierce wind over the exhibit cases. Tomás kept up a raw cry of fear from somewhere as the air thrummed with a pounding beat. A blur of colors appeared on the screen, close enough to show a rough texture that caught the light from a nearby wall lamp.

At the same moment, there was a metallic keening, followed by a crash. The blur in front of the camera vanished. A dark shape disappeared off camera from its position by the now-wrecked vault door.

"Before you can say 'what the hell was that', I can tell you what

it's *not*," Hector mused, his eyes riveted on screen. "I put that thrumming beat into a sound processor. It's way too slow to be the rotor cycle of a helicopter or drone aircraft. The screech doesn't match anything mechanical, either. If I didn't know better, I'd guess it was a recording of a red-tailed hawk, amplified about fifty times."

I bit back the first couple of things that came to mind. I was right, beyond the shadow of a doubt. This was a griffin's work. But while I couldn't let on about what I knew, I could still find out something critical to my case in Andeluvia.

I leaned forward and asked Hector to do one more thing.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

"Can we rewind to the moment where we got that close-up blur?" I asked.

"Thought you'd ask that." A couple of taps on his keyboard and we jumped there. Hector moved his finger close to the screen, pointing out the detail. "See these ridges? I thought they were metal parts at first, or maybe scales. Yet they bend and flex when in motion. I'd almost think they were giant feathers…"

"You'd think," I agreed.

Tomás had been right about the colors he'd seen. This was a griffin's flank and wing. There was the golden fur as it went by the lens, followed by the lighter color of feathers. Feathers that, just as the light caught, shimmered with the green of a male peacock's plumage.

A series of guitar tones sounded from my pocket, jolting me out of my thoughts. I fished out my phone and shut down the reminder alarm with a grimace. Hector remained fixated on the screen, trying vainly to figure out an explanation that didn't sound ludicrous. Unfortunately, I'd have to let him stew.

"I've got an urgent appointment with Detective Esteban," I said regretfully. "This…is interesting, I'll give you that."

Hector leaned back, ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. "That's one way to put it."

"Can you make me a copy of this, send it to my office? Maybe I'll be able to come up with some new insight."

"Sure thing."

I thanked him and headed downstairs towards the parking lot. I'd kept my expression neutral, but inside, I kept my jubilation tightly leashed.

Hector's footage had just moved me a big step closer to nailing my mystery griffin.

* * *

The LAPD's new indoor shooting range was attached to their main

building through a wedge-shaped annex that looked amazingly like a cheese grater set on its side. For me, it was a ten-minute walk or a quick car ride away across Union Station's rail yard. I had packed my gear in a heavy canvas sports bag, so I slung it over my shoulder and made my way through the doors. I found Esteban just outside the glassed-in shooting area, where he was busy talking to the Range Safety Officer. He flashed me a smile as I joined him.

"You're early," he said approvingly. Then, to the RSO he added, "We can use bay number ten, right?"

The man nodded. "At the end of the corridor, turn right. Second one on your left."

Esteban thanked him, then reached down to grab his own shoulder bag, making a motion with his head for me to follow him. The dim sounds of firing echoed through the safety windows down the hall. The smells of nitroglycerin, sawdust, and graphite fairly tingled in my nose. Where the corridor came to a stop, the signage indicated that those working with long-barreled weapons should turn to the left, while those practicing with short-barreled guns were to turn to the right.

The new range was, like most ranges I'd seen, divided into separate lanes where one could aim at body-shaped paper targets at various distances. Esteban and I set our bags down at the table just outside the shooting bay to put on eye and ear protection. I still had an awful time keeping fingerprint smudges off the shooting glasses, but I did like the new ear protection. Instead of sticking with the hairstyle-destroying earmuffs, the LAPD had jumped into the twenty-first century and changed to electronically-enhanced ear plugs. While you still had to raise your voice to make yourself heard, no one had to shout at the top of their lungs anymore.

We took the bags into the shooting bay and set out the remainder of our gear. The three safety-glassed walls separating us from the hallway and the other bays reminded me of a king-sized phone booth. That said, it was both larger and better maintained than my worst room in college. Esteban squinted at the target downrange as if considering something as he spoke.

“I looked through the tests you sent me from your last practice exam,” he began. “As far as the Q&A sections, you’re just going to have to rote-memorize a lot of facts. Your range scores…they’re not terrible, but not consistent enough to be sure you’ll pass. You tend to pull your shots off to one side, then the other as you compensate for your last miss.”

I sighed, thinking of the times I’d had to use my weapon. I’d gotten lucky, but I couldn’t rely on that consistently. And danger in Andeluvia always seemed to come in a few leagues above my weight class.

“I agree, I need to get down here to practice more. Which means I’m going to have buy more ammo.”

“Before you do, I want you to try something different. *Un truco especial*, as my own instructor would have said. And it won’t cost a dime.”

“I’m all ears.”

“You need to practice your trigger pull. Dry firing your weapon while concentrating on your trigger pull should help. A lot.”

“Okay, let’s try it.” I checked my firearm to make sure that it was unloaded, all while keeping it safely pointed downrange. I got into my shooting stance, raised the weapon, squinted at the target, and prepared to squeeze the trigger.

“One moment.” Esteban fished in his pocket and drew out a quarter. He balanced it on the flat surface on the top of my gun’s barrel. “There’s our special trick. If you’re doing your trigger pulls correctly, the quarter will stay balanced right here as you fire.”

That was easier said than done.

The quarter quivered as if it were a branch in a high wind on my first pull. It flipped off and landed on the floor after the third one. Esteban bent down and retrieved it for me.

“You see why this is a necessary evil,” he said. “It forces you to watch the end of your barrel and keep it steady. Otherwise, you’re anticipating the shot or jerking the trigger too quickly.”

I performed another dozen dry fires before the quarter slipped off again. Then another set of three. And another six. Esteban retrieved

the quarter each time and re-balanced it. Frowning, he reached around me and touched my wrist with his hand, leveling out my grip.

"Thanks," I said. My arms were beginning to quiver, and I wasn't sure it was from fatigue.

"*De nada.* Let me check your form."

He stood right next to me, adjusting my grip, my elbows, even nudging my leg slightly to one side. Not a single move was flirtatious; he took this very seriously. But with a rush of blood to my cheeks, I became abruptly aware of his proximity. The warm feel of his breath on the back of my neck, the scent of his skin and the cedar wood aroma of his aftershave.

The memory of pad thai noodles came to mind, lying untouched and steaming on Esteban's table in their half-open container. The conviction that steam hotter than that must be pouring from his lips, for they were like a feather-soft furnace of warmth on my neck, right down in that little notch between my collarbones. The spot that never failed to get me squealing like a schoolgirl.

"Dayna?" Esteban said softly. "You are paying attention, right?"

"Oh, you bet. Not sure it's to what you want, though."

Esteban pulled back a little and looked to see how serious I was. He smiled in that seductive way he had, and it looked a hell of a lot better in real life than in a troubled dream.

"So you *have* been missing me."

"Of course I have! Whatever made you doubt that?"

"You know what I mean."

I sighed. "My duties to Andeluvia."

"Sometimes I wish that they'd never chosen you."

"I wasn't asked for specifically," I said, as I lowered my weapon. I flipped on the safety, set the firearm aside, and rubbed my arms as I spoke. "It was blind chance. They'd have taken any Johnny or Jane-come lately who picked up the medallion we found on the body at the construction site."

"I suppose," he said, chewing that over. "Then they didn't offer you some…I don't know, position? Some reason to stay there?"

He was fishing, trying to politely determine if I shared his interest

in our being together. In my staying in this world, with him. I honestly wasn't sure what to say. When I'd inquired, the Andeluvians had been strict with the 'observe but don't let outworlders visit' thing.

And yet, there was that mystical, unreadable Codex back at my house. A gigantic dragon that had destroyed two forests and vanished into thin air. A mysterious theft, performed by a world-jumping griffin. There were friends counting on me to solve these mysteries.

But I couldn't hurt Esteban over mysteries from another world. Couldn't hurt him over the nebulous threat of some now-banished specter. And even now, the likelihood of Fitzwilliam banning my return forever had pretty good odds behind it.

"Alanzo," I said, looking into his kindly face. "You have nothing to worry about."

He grinned. I basked in the warmth of his hazel eyes.

And then there was a knock at the door behind us.

We turned. There, looking a lot like an extremely well-fed specter behind the frosted safety glass, stood Lieutenant Luis Ollivar. He tapped at the glass again, and then crooked his finger, summoning us inside.

Esteban and I packed up our gear, shedding our earplugs and eye protection only when we'd stepped out of the shooting bay and back into the interior corridor.

"That looked cozy for practice," he remarked.

I set my jaw and firmly reminded myself to keep cool this time. "How can I help you, Lieutenant?"

"I don't need anything, Chrissie. I just saw you as I was on my way to drop something off, so I decided to give it to you in person." He handed over a slip of paper, explaining what it was even as I read it. "It's your assigned exam date. You've only got ten days, which might be cutting it really thin for firearms practice."

"I'll figure something out, Ollivar," I said, refusing to let him rattle me. I reached out and patted him on one beefy arm. "I appreciate your concern."

He shrugged. "I'm not concerned. Just curious."

"About what?"

“As the firearms certification administrator, I’m supposed to review your employment files. I saw where you requested a transfer to part-time or one-quarter time status. That’s a strange move for someone who claims they want to retain their weapons certs. The way I read it, you’ve got no interest in staying here at all.”

With that, Ollivar left to lumber his way back towards the main hall.

Esteban’s expression remained poker-face blank. Only the stiff change in his posture gave his feelings away.

“This isn’t what…I mean…” I blurted.

He slung his bag over his shoulder. “Now I am curious as well. About when you were going to tell me your plans.”

“Alanzo, please! I don’t want you to–”

“It’s all right, Dayna,” he said tightly, and the warmth had vanished from his expression. “As you might put it, *you have nothing to worry about.*”

With that, he left me behind as he tromped down the corridor in Ollivar’s wake.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

A plate of purple berries sat outside the trader's cabin, looking like a platter of jewels.

After picking me up on schedule, Shaw came in for a landing at the griffin aerie. I slid out of the saddle, taking a moment to lift off the bags with the new swab kits. I shaded my eyes against the early morning sun, taking a closer look. The plate sitting out in front of the cabin was piled high with tightly-packed wine-colored clusters that looked uncomfortably like the ones in my dream from last night.

"Thou espies berries from the *amidach* tree," Shaw explained. "Thy palate may enjoy the taste. Most humans do."

The name sounded familiar, and with Shaw's endorsement I had no need to hold back. In fact, after the first bite it took a little willpower to not start gorging myself. These were the kind of berries that the advertisements always promised but never quite delivered: the ones which would pop into a splash of juice in the mouth, refreshing and tingly at the same time.

And yet, as I munched through a few more handfuls, I realized that the taste was maddeningly familiar. I was sure that I'd had something like these berries before. But as soon as I saw flecks of purple dance at the edge of my vision, I was sure.

"I've eaten from the amidach tree once before," I concluded. "When I visited the Fayleene Woods, as one of them. Only they eat the bark, not the fruit."

Shaw made a noble lion snort. "The bark? 'Twould explain why our friend Liam makes such a pitiful mouthful."

"Well, he is bigger now," I said between bites. "Ever since becoming Protector."

"Aye. Many males of his kind still outweigh him, but all give way. That is, at least they give way for now."

"Only for now?"

"Thou knowest that Liam feels at best mixed on his position."

I considered that. I knew that Liam hadn't been all that keen on his position at the start. But that was when he'd been set up to take on the dragon Sirrahon. If he still wanted to step down, that was news to me.

"What is Liam doing, exactly?"

"The exact opposite of what his predecessors have done. Each Protector, before they assumed power, became a hermit. A reclusive forest spirit. They only chose an heir once they felt the burden of age closing in. Liam wants none of this. He has already chosen multiple stags of virtue and honor to train in the arts of the fey. 'Tis said that this is proof he wants to leave, not stay."

My situation back in Los Angeles sounded surprisingly similar. "Maybe he wants someone as a backup. In case something happens to him. Look what happened when Quinval, his predecessor, left everything to chance."

"Mayhap. Thou art enjoying the sweets from the amidach tree?"

I tilted up the empty plate. "Past tense. I did."

"Good. Hollyhock shall be glad to know. 'Twas she who located the delicacy and brought it to you." Shaw cocked his head at me. "Apparently, thy actions involving Thundercrack served to make a strong impression, and she speaks very highly of you now."

"Only now?"

"She did not speak ill before. However, praise from a father about an un-met, otherworldly friend can be written off as mere affection."

I nodded in understanding. I'd been tested, and Holly hadn't found me wanting. I found myself feeling quite happy about that. It wouldn't hurt to count another member of Grimshaw's family as a friend.

Shaw cleared his throat for a moment, which made my friend sound like a Harley motorcycle trying to start up. While he did so, I located and opened the pack I brought yesterday to look for some pre-packaged breakfast. I set aside a couple of juice pouches and Army-surplus MREs before he spoke again. His voice took on such a somber tone it made me pay special attention.

"Dayna, I must ask about the Codex, thy text about the last Great War of Andeluvia. Was thou able to decipher yet more of it?"

I let out a sigh. “Only that the pooka are one of the species on the side of the ‘Creatures of the Light’, and I’m not really one-hundred percent sure of that. I’ve been going over Zeno’s books in my spare time, but the symbols in the book are just so dense, it’s maddening trying to find something that resembles what I’m seeing half the time. I got so frustrated that I put the entire thing aside for a bit to let my brain unscramble. Everything’s under lock and key in the roll-up desk I have in the living room, though, so no one’s about to run off with those texts.”

He nodded. “Some good has already come from thy work. We now know that mine own kind, the fayleene, and the pooka were on one side, the dragons and demons on the other. We know who won. That is a start.”

“It is, but hardly an end. And Ulrik’s disbelief worries me.”

Shaw took a moment to consider his answer. His voice dropped, almost to a whisper.

“Thou knowest that I have been in council with the Elders. Matters discussed there are not normally shared with those…who are not of mine own kind.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine as I nodded in understanding.

“But I freely call thee my friend, Dayna. Thou art the one who restored honor to me when it seemed I would die with none. Thou art the one who gave me back purpose when life had lost its luster and taste. I would share with thee what was said, if thou wouldst hear.”

That pronouncement humbled me. “I’m all ears. As my mother would say, whatever you say stays between you, me, and the fence post.”

His noble eagle face managed a puzzled look. “What fence post dost thou use to discuss such matters?”

“Never mind. What I meant was: what you tell me remains private.”

Now it was Shaw’s turn to sigh. “Just before the Council met, Elder Ulrik took me aside and asked if thy mission here related to Belladonna’s visions.”

“What did you say?”

“I said nay, I thought not. But I had to say that thy findings might cast the Eldest’s visions in a new light.”

I sat back against a sun-warmed rock. “I bet that went over well.”

“Thou hast seen how dead-set he is against the High Elder’s pronouncements. He then asked me if I believed in such tales, like the spirit stones that spoke, or the return of Sirrahon. I answered rashly, perhaps, but I told him that if Sirrahon t’were but a fantasy, it had grabbed me in its talons and squeezed hard enough to crack my ribs!”

“Did that make him see the light?”

Shaw shook his head peevishly. “Nay, Dayna. My wounds left me unmarked, else he might have considered my opinion with more weight.”

“But…the Elders helped organize throwing Rocky into the sea! Surely they must have believed that something was going on at that point!”

“They helped in order to humor the needs of their chief ally, King Fitzwilliam. But none of the Elders heard the rock-demon speak. Nor did they witness it cast spells, such as the one that changed thy character to a most unwelcome nature.”

My cheeks reddened with that one. Rocky had indeed altered my mind, in a horrifically subtle way, until Liam had dispelled the magic used. I still felt awful about the entire incident, and more than a little violated by it.

“I hope that didn’t put Ulrik off. He does support your kids, in that whole ‘Way of the Serpent’ thing.”

“Elder Ulrik? ‘Tis doubtful. Ulrik served as the mount for Good King Benedict nigh on three decades, and survived wounding to the quick many times. Truly, he is one of the toughest of my people. Emotions shall not be his undoing.”

“And the council’s decision about your kids?” I prompted.

“Their decision is that the Way of the Serpent is a martial school that…is less honorable than it should be.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, concerned. “What does that mean for Ironwood? Or Blackthorn and Holly, for that matter?”

“Nothing involving exile or loss of position, let alone promotion to

the Skinned Ones. Yet while they may still practice their art, they may not teach it to others. Their dishonorable school with perish with them when they die."

"That's half a loaf, at least. I'd hate to see anything bad happen to your children."

"They are not all of my offspring," he said, almost reflexively. "But wouldst my mind settle on a course of action about them!"

Shaw began to pace. His paws threw up sand as he did so. "Thou knowest how I feel about their 'art'. But mine own pride sired them as True Born, and my pride cannot help but take wing at what they have done. Ironwood is one of the few intelligent enough to have sired a new martial art. Blackthorn is one of the best warriors, and he can perform feats I never thought possible for any griffin. And Hollyhock is a natural leader out of the egg. Why she was passed over for Lance Captain in favor of others mystifies me."

My mind jumped back to what Belladonna had said before to Holly: *Thou hast freighted more dishonor than all the griffins here.*

But it was Ironwood who had created this 'dishonorable' Way of the Serpent, wasn't it? Shaw seemed to think so, and so did the Elders. If so, then what the hell had High Elder Belladonna been talking about? Was it some fantasy that had been concocted in one of her fever-dreams?

I didn't get a 'click' from my brain. Instead, I got a solid feeling in my gut, right where the cops said to check when hunches were formed.

There was something rotten at the core of the aerie, and not knowing what it was made my skin prick up with fear.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Shaw squinted at something approaching us from above. I couldn't make it out against the bright morning sunshine, but he filled me in.

"Speak of the fledglings, and they shall appear," he said, half to himself. "'Tis the three siblings. They spoke of joining thee for the morning repast, and to bring something fresh for your fare."

"Didn't I just eat that?"

"Nay, that was a special treat from Hollyhock to thee. Observe, and you shall see how we hunt away from land."

I got to my feet as the trio of griffins soared past us, heading south out to sea. Intrigued, I dove into my pack and found my binoculars. With just a little fiddling I could watch the action, even without Shaw's superhumanly keen eyesight.

Once they had made it some distance offshore, Ironwood and Holly began to patrol in a wide, lazy oval. Blackthorn began a steep climb, ascending so that he was much higher than either of the other two. His great wings spread out to their maximum, and he leveled out into a controlled, tight spiral. Abruptly I realized that he'd caught a thermal, an updraft of warm air, and was using it to efficiently maintain his altitude with a minimum of effort. In the meantime, his brother and sister had continued their flight, which took them over different patches of blue-green sea.

"The lower two…I'm guessing they're performing a search pattern." I observed.

"They are the spotters," Shaw confirmed. "Blackthorn is the striker. Look, Ironwood has spotted the quarry. The hunt goes easy this day."

Indeed, the smaller male griffin had begun twitching his wingtips, pointing down and to one side. Holly joined him, and together they zeroed in on one patch of ocean, wings silently signaling to their brother further above. Finally, the target must have been spotted, as

Blackthorn hovered in one spot.

Then he brought his wings in with one final, propulsive beat and dove towards the ocean. His wings folded into his body and he became a sleek fur-and-feathered torpedo. Blackthorn plunged beak-first into one of the deep blue swells with a mighty splash. I couldn't hear it at this distance, but the plume of spray kicked up looked like a geyser blowing its top.

I suddenly became aware that I'd been holding my breath. I counted the seconds as I waited for the griffin to resurface. I stopped after I'd passed the two-minute mark. Blackthorn probably had huge reserves of air in his lungs, but he was a big animal and had been working hard aloft.

"Are we sure that he's okay?" I asked timidly.

Shaw gave a shrug. "He is not fresh from the egg. I must trust him to know his limits."

Suddenly, Blackthorn erupted from the water like a breaching killer whale. Only, he didn't stop with a breach, he kept heading skyward on dripping wings. In each taloned paw he held a sixty-pound salmon. I let out a gasp as I realized that he had an even bigger fish held firmly in his stout beak.

"Okay," I said shakily, as Blackthorn headed back towards us, flanked by his siblings. "That was impressive."

"Aye," was all Shaw said, though I believe he sounded a trifle smug about it.

There was plenty of open space around the trading cabin for the three griffins to land. Blackthorn carefully placed the two fish held in his paws on a clean patch of stone. The third, largest fish he lay before his father.

"'Tis quite a meal for one such as I," Shaw said, and I definitely heard some paternal pride leaking through his restraint. "Share it with me, if thou wouldst."

"You do me honor," came the reply. "Bide, if you would."

With that, Blackthorn stepped away from us. He fluffed out his feathers and then sent a rolling, rhythmic quiver down from the base of his skull along his spine. The fur along his torso sloughed off the

water in a spray, like a dog shaking itself off after climbing out of a pool. The clean, salt scent of ocean water hung in the air as he rejoined us, still damp but no longer dripping.

"When you last left, we looked at the gear you brought," Ironwood said. His tan-gold fur gleamed in the morning sun. The cut on his flank had crusted over and seemed well on its way to healing. "Our sire informed us that you planned to eat what is inside these bags and boxes. Since we scented nothing resembling food, we decided to bring you a fresher repast. Given the work of the Kescari, we are sure that humans eat fish, if nothing else."

"That we do," I acknowledged. "Thank you for your generosity in 'hunting' down the morning meal."

"Hunting is always enjoyed," Blackthorn said, in his deep, bass voice. The sprinkle of black spots running up and over his eyes twitched with pleasure as he nodded at his catch. "These put up a good chase. Hope you like fish. We know not how humans eat them."

I considered. "I do like sushi, but I'm thinking that I need to cook a piece of that salmon."

"We have flint and steel," Holly put in. "And there is kindling stored in the cabin."

"The kindling I can use. I have something from my world to handle the rest."

It took me only a moment to pop inside and grab a bundle of stored twigs. I set up a nest of flammable material in one of the stone fire pits outside the cabin then, with a flourish, I produced a long-necked lighter from my pocket. A *snap*, and the gas-powered flame set the kindling alight with ease. I got a couple of 'Ooohs' as a reaction from Shaw's kids.

"That would come in handy on the colder, wetter winter nights," Ironwood observed.

"If the Elders allow me to gift one to you, I'd be happy to," I said. "I just don't know if they would. Andeluvia seems to be very leery of allowing outworlder technology in."

"Given the council's suspicion of anything 'new'?" Holly asked rhetorically. "I doubt they would allow it. But at least we can watch

how it works for now."

I built up the fire with some larger sticks, and then unfolded a portable metal grill frame to sit on top of it. Then I got out a nonstick pan, spices, utensils, and a large camping knife. I knelt by where Blackthorn had deposited his catch. The salmon was still glistening from the sea, brilliant silver-pink, and much too large for me to eat.

I carved out a half-pound chunk from the midsection as best I could and moved it to my pan before looking up. Everyone was so riveted on what I was doing that they hadn't touched their food. Well, when you have a strange, otherworldly creature over for breakfast, I guess that was to be expected.

"Come on," I insisted, as I shook some spice blend from a plastic canister on the fillet and moved it to the flame. "Don't wait on me."

Shaw lopped off the front third of his salmon with one snap of his beak, and then nudged the larger portion to Blackthorn. Ironwood and Holly went to work on their own meals in a similar fashion. In the time it took me to sear my fillet and put it on a plate, all four griffins had downed their meals. I suppose the fact that they didn't have to stop and chew helped speed things along. That said, they were extremely neat diners. At most, I spied a few silvery fish scales left on the ground. I didn't comment. I couldn't anyway, not after my first forkful. Perhaps it was the extreme freshness of the fish, but I'd had salmon in four-star restaurants in Los Angeles that didn't hold a candle to this. I downed my portion only after forcing myself to take human-sized bites instead of griffin ones.

"Delicious," I pronounced, as my fork hit bottom with a scrape. "Blackthorn, any time you want to bring home dinner, you be my guest."

The big drake simply bowed. I began bagging up some of the used cutlery to take back and wash, including the empty plate Holly had left out for me when I'd arrived.

"I gather you liked the snack before the meal as well," Holly observed, noting that the plate was empty.

"Better than liked. Loved. Where did you find those berries, anyway?"

Holly fluffed her feathers slightly, obviously pleased with my compliment. “There is a stand of amidach trees at the lee edge of the Greenway.”

I clearly heard her pronounce the capital in ‘Greenway’, so I had to ask. “What’s that?”

Shaw cocked an eyebrow at me. “As an outsider, Dayna, what do the flights of mine own people look like, upon their coming or leaving?”

I considered. “Pretty random, I guess. It’s hard on the human brain to think of casual pedestrians moving in three dimensions, not two. In my world, where we use machines to get airborne, we employ people to ‘control’ which routes an aircraft can take so it can fly safely.”

“Don’t be deceived by appearances,” Holly said. “Before fledglings are allowed to leave the nest without an escort, they are taught in which spaces they are allowed to spread their wings.”

“And the Greenway is one of these spaces?”

“Think of it as a lane in a road. The Greenway is where we use the land, to eat the fruit or hunt the game when we wish. Then there is the Redway, where anyone can fly into or out of the aerie as they wish.”

“Got it. One space for ‘hunting and gathering’, the next for ‘general aviation’. Any others?”

Ironwood let out a deep chuckle. “As with all things mortal, what comes in must go out.”

“True.” The trader’s cabin had come with a neat set of chamber pots, but I’d set up a small portable chemical toilet in the far corner, complete with a privacy curtain.

“The final area we leave for elimination of waste.”

“That would be…let me guess: the Brownway?”

A nod from the Lance Captain confirmed my guess. “We rotate the uses of each space in a quarter-score of years, so that there is always one place left fallow, one useful, and one fertile.”

It sounded like the griffins utilized organic agriculture of a sort. Interesting. And a ‘recharge time’ of ten years was certainly long

enough for griffin waste to compost away any pathogens, as well as become grade-A fertilizer.

"So…you never just go in the water, then?"

Holly made a mild squawk of disgust. "In the Weatherglass Sea? The water is considered something sacred, not to mention our main source of food! A coldspring of water emerges from the depths offshore, bringing with it tremendous bounty."

"Sounds like what we would call the 'upwelling' of a cold bottom current. You're right, that would produce a lot of sea life. All that easy-to-harvest food would explain why your people chose to found their aerie here."

A snort came from Blackthorn as he stretched languorously, like a sated tabby. "That food we ate. Not as easy to harvest as one might think."

"What do humans from your world typically eat?" Holly inquired. "As my brother Ironwood said, we scented nothing edible in any of your gear."

"If you're interested, I could open some of my packages," I offered.

With that, I opened a half-dozen of the MREs I'd bought sight unseen from a surplus store. I put the contents on my remaining plates and passed the pre-packaged food around. Despite the amount of salmon that had just gone down the four griffins' hatches, immediate crunching and slurping ensued.

"These large worms are so tender!" Holly announced, as she gobbled her entrée down. "And the way your people left the blood to clot is magnificent!"

Well, it looked like Holly liked the spaghetti in meat sauce. Ironwood poked at his meal with a talon, sniffing his mottled-green pesto chicken suspiciously before devouring it in three relatively delicate snaps of his beak.

"It looked like someone left your bird out in the sun too long. But it did not smell rotten. I could grow to like it." He turned to Blackthorn. "What say you, brother?"

"Good," Blackthorn said, as he tore into the remains of a spicy

beef enchilada. “It tingles.”

“What be this meal?” Shaw asked, his beak still half in the entrée’s serving bag.

I checked. “That’s Sloppy Joe filling.”

“‘Tis delicious!” He made a truly horrendous slurping sound as he vacuumed up the rest of the contents.

I’d learned from first-hand experience dealing with Andeluvian beings to turn anything snack-sized into a smorgasbord. I did just that by putting the rest of the side-dishes out for whomever could snatch them up first. In that way, the four griffins polished off packages of jalapeño cheese spread, raisin nut granola bars, hard baking soda biscuits, mashed potatoes, vanilla pound cake, corn bread, strips of turkey jerky, cinnamon scones, walnut brownies, and even a large bag of dehydrated butter granules.

They followed that up by idly munching on and swallowing each of the squeeze pouches, spice packets, and everything else I’d brought. That is, except for the things I’d already removed: the miniature glass bottles of tabasco sauce, hot beverage bags, cutlery, and flameless heating elements. Part of me worried about the griffins consuming a good chunk of plastic and god-knows-what-else that was non-organic. Then again, I’d seen Shaw eat tin foil and plastic wrap without getting so much as a case of heartburn.

“Now that we have filled in our empty spots,” Holly announced, “I think we need to tell Dayna about her role as nest keeper. What say you, Lance Captain?”

“I should have brought it up first,” Ironwood agreed.

“Wait, what–” I began, before my mind caught up with the conversation and I remembered my little one-on-one with Lance Captain Thundercrack.

My concerns about the theft in my world, the machinations among the griffin Elders, even the damned inscrutable Codex suddenly seemed like background noise. I’d been volunteered against my will yet again. This time in a sporting event run by beings with the size and power of airborne grizzly bears.

And this sport was for *blood*.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Shaw got to his feet, his food sated, lazy demeanor falling away. “Nest keeper? What dost thou mean?”

The three younger griffins exchanged looks that fairly well expressed ‘Uh-oh, do you wanna be the one to tell our grumpy dad what we’ve been up to?’

Shaw had been right in assessing his youngest as a natural leader, as Holly was the one to speak up. “Father, this is the fallout from the confrontation with Thundercrack of the Valkir. Once he had been bested, he challenged us for honor’s sake to a pride-spar match.”

“With Dayna as nest keeper?” Shaw’s voice rose a notch. “Art thou relieved of all thy senses? She is an envoy of Andeluvia! Anything that happens to her could mean war!”

“Nothing will happen.” Blackthorn replied, in his choppy speech. “We are Reyka. They are Valkir. They are talk. We are fire.”

For the first time, I saw Shaw’s expression shift to disbelief and concern.

“Confidence is thy strength, Blackthorn. As it is for all three of my True Born. But now I worry that all thy abilities lead to arrogance. The Valkir are killers. They seek out advantage in strange ways some might not approve of.”

“As do we,” Ironwood said evenly. “We know you have denounced my art to the Elders in Council, and they may yet rule against us.”

Shaw shot me an unmistakable warning glance. I immediately understood.

Grimshaw hasn’t told his kids yet about the Council’s decision.

Given the bad blood over the issue already, I wondered if it would permanently strain or snap their relationship.

“Perhaps the Council shall yet see reason,” Holly put in, indicating a rapidly approaching gray form flying down from further up the mountain slope. “That looks like Elder Ulrik on the wing.”

The young reeve was right. Ulrik, his polished armor gleaming, came circling in to land next to Shaw.

"Apologies if I am interrupting a family gathering," he stated. "The Council needs Shaw's presence as they deliberate on a most pressing matter."

"I shall come at once, Elder." Shaw narrowed his eyes as he added, "Dayna, I shall return later this evening. I'm sure that mine own True Born can keep thee safe in the meantime."

With that, Ulrik took off in a flurry of wingbeats, Shaw following close behind. The remaining griffins kept quiet and watched until the two vanished into one of the upper grottoes of the mountain.

"Come, Dayna," Holly said, presenting her flank to me. I mounted up as best I could as she continued. "We do not have as much time as I would like, but we need to practice for the spar on the next morn."

"Your father seemed…concerned over this match," I observed as we took to the air. Holly's brothers did the same and we circled around to the north side of the mountain face towards the training ground allocated to the Reyka Pride.

"The Valkir have been overcome by battle lust in the past," she said, unconcerned. "When they smell blood, they can lose control."

"That doesn't…you know, *bother* you at all? This match is supposed to *be* for blood."

Holly made a feminine version of the griffin snort. "Those who lose control of their instincts tend to lose the match. Valkir are brawlers, not warriors."

"And what of this 'seeking advantage in strange ways'?"

"My father refers to magic. It is said…" Holly paused for a moment, as if deciding what to say, then continued. "It is said that they have sought out magic to help them. Making deals with others to advance their cause. The Valkir have oft spoken against our people's service as Andeluvian mounts, and have wanted to abolish the Council outright."

I chewed that ripe chestnut over in my mind as we approached the training grounds. Again, this supposedly 'orderly' griffin society wasn't all that it seemed. Holly made a couple of passes over a huge

oval area bounded by a hedge of thorny bushes. Towards each end of the oval, roughly where the goal posts would be in a football arena, were raised stone platforms topped by a jumble of ten-foot tall pillars. The remaining area surrounding the platforms was a cat's cradle of boulders, ravines, twisting vines, and scrub brush.

The area had a sinister look that made my insides run cold.

Holly landed at the edge of one of the platforms and let me get off. Wrapped around the pillar in the center was a black and red Andeluvian pennant. Suddenly things became clear: this was simply a griffin version of 'capture the flag'.

I pursed my lips, considering. "I'm guessing that this platform is the 'nest', and I get to be the one who watches over the flag."

Holly looked surprised. "You have done a pride-spar before?"

"Not exactly, but some of the concepts between our worlds seem the same." I had visions of a bunch of grade-schoolers, mostly boys, running across a grassy green soccer field, tackling each other in an effort to 'tag' someone. Of course, instead of grade schoolers, these were fully-grown griffins at play. "I don't think your version of the game uses a 'jail', though."

"What is a 'jail'?"

"A place to confine prisoners."

A shake of the head as we walked towards the center of the platform. The space between the fluted stone columns was easy enough for me to navigate, but Holly had to pick and choose her route with a little more care, lest she scrape her furled wings.

"No, we don't use a 'jail'. That strikes me as odd. When would you have the time to escort defeated foes there? These spars are never more than a few minutes long."

I suppose that did make sense. Given the speed at which griffins moved, it wouldn't make sense to put some on prisoner detail. "How do you 'defeat' your foes, then?"

We reached the center column, where the banner dangled just out of my reach. Below it was one of the scrubby thorn bushes, this one growing from a crack in the old flagstones. Holly reached along one branch and drew out a small round fruit. She mashed it and rubbed

the residue against the column, where it left a pomegranate-colored smear.

"We coat our beaks and talons with this dye, and use it to mark first 'touch' when we tackle and take down our foes. Touches to the wings, the neck, or to more than one limb is grounds for calling a 'kill'."

I ran my finger through the red smear. The fruit dye felt tacky, like drying glue, and it had already turned darker, as if it were blood trying to clot. Yeah, that helped my already fraying nerves right there.

"That's first touch. I assume first blood is the same…only with griffin-colored dye."

My companion nodded gravely. "That would be what Thundercrack and the Valkir have in mind. But you need not worry. My two brothers' lances, as well as my own, practice the Way of the Serpent, and they shall have mastery over that pride."

Mastering one's pride. That sounded more than a little ironic to me, given the situation.

"Not that I don't already have full confidence in you, your brothers, or your lances," I cautioned, "But just in case any of the enemy makes it in here, do you have some griffin art to teach me so I can hold them off? I think the Elders would be more than a little put off if I took my gun out and shot someone. Even if it were Thundercrack, which might be an improvement on things."

Holly did her best to hide her amusement as she hunted for something in the shadow of another pillar. She let out a chirp of pleasure as she found what she was looking for and handed it to me. At first glance, I thought it was a walking stick. Then I noticed that the twisted length of wood was tapered at one end, while the other sported a large, wicked looking knob at the top.

"We griffins have thirty-six different Martial Schools," she informed me as I turned the stick around in my hand, getting its feel. "The ones we choose to follow depend on our age and our skills. Sea Wind or Cloud Kick for younger gryphlets, who must rely on speed. Winter Storm or Lightning Strike for our strongest flyers. Rolling Mountain and Stone Hammer for those with the most brute strength,

usually the mature drakes."

I quirked a grin at her. "And what about this 'Way of the Serpent' I keep hearing about?"

"Well, obviously that's reserved for the smartest."

"That sounds pretty cool," I admitted. "Maybe I could get into this griffin thing after all. Which school are you going to teach me?"

"It's not so much a school…" Holly hedged. "Though I suppose you could call it 'talon popping'. Yes, that's what we can call it: the art of talon popping."

I gave her a sardonic look. "You're kidding me."

"It's the first type of defense that all chicks learn."

"Great. It's a 'chick thing'. Level with me, Holly. What does that mean, exactly?"

Holly turned to face me. "It means that it can be used by those who cannot yet fly. Earth-bound, and with less strength than a mature griffin, they must rely on a club. While this weapon cannot bring down any but the clumsiest attacker, it can stun, and it can certainly beat off a talon that is grasping for the nest's banner. Is that 'level' enough for you?"

I hit the pillar to my right with my stick-club with a *smash*. Yes, that would 'pop' the talon bone of any griffin unlucky enough to grab onto that surface. Holly continued to watch me, seemingly delighted or bemused by my response.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You continue to surprise, that is all. You are smaller and weaker than any one of us, that much is true. But you have spirit. You have grit. These qualities of yours...it makes you exotic. It intrigues me."

A distant caw echoed in my ear, similar to the one I'd heard summoning Linden to patrol.

"The lances?" I asked.

"Aye, they are getting ready to practice."

Holly and I walked back out to the edge of the platform. At the farther end of the oval I recognized Blackthorn's bulk right away, then Ironwood's light gold coat. I recognized many of the other members of the Reyka pride with them. Another couple dozen griffins had joined

them, most with black bars or spots along their wings and beaks.

"The Korlson Pride has agreed to this practice spar," Holly pointed out. "They are fair enough warriors, and they are double our numbers, but not really our match. I must go join the fray. Watch our maneuvers, so you know what to expect on the morn. And if any try for that banner…"

I made a menacing motion with my club in response. Holly gave a chirrup of approval and took off towards the waiting group. I found a nearby column that had snapped off at convenient seat height and made myself as comfortable as possible while the lances set up. One of the Reyka griffins flew in with a large trough, gripping the long object via a metal handle held in his beak.

The trough was filled with the same bright-colored fruit dye from the thorn bush. The warriors dipped beak tips and talons into the mix, then split into their two groups. Blackthorn took his lance high up into a wide arc then immediately curved back towards the opposition's side of the field. The Korlson griffins, seemingly unsure of how to react to this aggressive maneuver, formed their warriors into a dense wedge, effectively blocking the way between the largest griffin on the field and the Korlsons' 'nest' platform. For a few seconds, I thought things would remain in stasis, neither team able to gain an advantage.

Then, Ironwood and Holly's lances leapt as one from the underbrush, taking the Korlson Pride in the flank.

A scream came from the leading ranks of the griffins.

Battle had finally been joined.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Korlson formation fell apart from left to right across the field, with griffins falling out and cursing as they landed, dye dripping from 'cuts' delivered to the neck or wings. The Reyka lances drove deep into the Korlsons, even outnumbered three to one, but at the very point of the action Shaw's two children remained the deadliest, knocking back opponents right and left, scoring them with sticky swathes of scarlet.

Just when the Korlson formation looked like it was going to rally, Blackthorn charged in from the front and kicked the rest to pieces. Again, the big griffin was like a gold-yellow zephyr, shouldering or tossing aside enemies to take down others he deemed more of a threat. The three siblings met at the core of the battle, turned so that their backs were towards each other, and began to undulate their tails.

I focused on the swirl of battle raging around the three. Whenever they were challenged, all it took was a few flicks of a tail to confuse or distract one of the Korlson griffins. In that split second, one of the siblings would strike, scoring a hit on neck or limb. Disqualified griffins started piling up around the trio, lying down where they had 'fallen' in battle.

Finally, the nest keeper for the Korlson Pride emerged, let out a crestfallen caw, and the action stopped. From all over the field, griffins got up and flew towards a pool situated at the far edge of the sparring area to wash off their dye marks. Holly and her brothers clapped the tips of their wings together in congratulations and then rubbed flanks. They play-tussled, pawing and nipping each other between neck and shoulder like overjoyed kittens.

Eventually, Holly flew back towards my nest platform, hovering in mid-air to give me an update. Her voice was raised, flushed with excitement. "The Korlson nest keeper called a halt to sparring when she realized that we had slay-marked all of her warriors. That was a rare and smashing victory!"

“It certainly looked it,” I agreed.

“We caught them by surprise. Unlikely that will happen again. Now we begin the spar anew, and continue until the sun stands directly above us.”

Holly pivoted on one wingtip, her leonine form amazingly agile in the air, and headed back to where her lance was anointing themselves with dye for the next combat. I kicked back, dug out a raisin nut granola bar I’d managed to save from the long-gobbled MREs, and settled in to wait for the new round to begin.

The next five or six replays were fun to observe, rather like watching a good football or basketball game on television. But to my surprise they were a little uninvolving after a while. Holly hadn’t been idly boasting when she’d claimed that even at three-to-one, the Korlson Pride was no match for Reyka. Though the numbers and the strategies varied – one time the opposition tried an all-out assault and got butchered, another time Ironwood dropped his lance straight in from above, surprising the hapless Korlsons – the result was always the same. Not a single enemy griffin got further than halfway across the field to me. Finally, as the sun moved towards noon, the sparring ceased, the Lance Captains bowed to each other, and Holly returned me to the trading cabin.

Thundercrack, looking as ever like an angry slab of muscle, awaited me there. The grim ranks of the Valkir Pride sat next to him. I was extra-glad now that I’d had a good breakfast, as it didn’t look like lunchtime was in the offing.

“If you wish me to stay,” Holly whispered in my ear, “Just say it in a manner that all can hear.”

I considered. “No. I need to deal with the Valkir without your backup. Otherwise, it looks…I don’t know, weak.”

Again, she appraised me. “You speak as one hatched from the egg. Perhaps father is right: you do have more than a little griffin in you.”

I stroked her head in thanks and bid her farewell. She frowned warningly at the Lance Captain of the Valkir Pride, but took off without further comment. Donning gloves, I set out my swabbing kits and announced that I was open for business. To no one’s surprise,

Thundercrack stepped up first. Without ceremony, he opened his mouth for me.

This time I felt less like a circus trainer putting his hand into a croc's mouth than a diver shoving his entire arm down the maw of a great white shark. Thundercrack's mouth was cavernous – it almost looked like I could curl up and sit on his tongue – but I got my sample without incident.

"I saw the spar practice today," he said, as I jotted his name and my notes down. "I will look forward to taking your flag from you, nest keeper. And perhaps a little of your blood in exchange for your ruse of yesterday."

"Well," I said carefully, "You still have to defeat all the Reyka Pride to get to me."

"Do I?"

Thundercrack gave me a smirk and strode off, allowing the next of the Valkir to step forward in turn. I put his words out of my mind. He was simply trying to rattle me, and focused on the task at hand.

But it wasn't until the sun began to set and Shaw had rejoined me at the cabin that I relaxed. My friend seemed tired and a little glum, so I invited him to share the last of my pre-made food. I dug out a single portion for myself and three for Shaw. Before I could use the meals' heating elements, Shaw had taken a new portion of kindling and wood to the embers of my early-morning fire and set it newly alight.

We ate without saying much, as I was tired as well. I'd taken many more samples today than previously, and it had taken time to wrap and store them in a cooler that I'd brought and stocked with synthetic ice. I spooned my way through a plastic tray of lasagna as Shaw crunched through a triple helping of MRE entrees. Finally, once he'd finished, he stretched out by the fire next to me like an eagle-headed Irish wolfhound.

"Thou seems no worse for wear after a day of sparring," Shaw observed.

"That's because no one even got close to me. Your kids…" I groped for the words. "They're really something else. Most of the

other griffins can't keep up with them."

"Aye. And I am one of that kind."

I sat up. "What do you mean?"

Shaw did not look at me, but I could hear the pain in his voice.

"I could not withhold the Council's decision from them any longer. I just came back from breaking the news. 'Twas not a pleasant deed. Gruff words were exchanged. They flew off into the dusk and outdistanced me. And I have no more welcome at the Reyka portion of the aerie for now."

There was very little I could say to that. I placed my hand on his head and he turned into my palm ever so slightly. I offered about the only thing I could at this point.

"This is going to be my first night spent at the aerie," I said. "If you're not going to be staying with the Reyka Pride, I'd appreciate it if you'd remain down here with me."

A deep-throated chuckle rolled from his chest. "Thou art ever the kind one, Dayna. A favor thou does for me, even while pretending to ask for one. I gladly accept thy offer."

Shaw closed his eyes and immediately began the long, slow exhalations of deep sleep. Even though I'd seen it before, it still amazed me at just how quickly and soundly griffins could go from their waking to their sleep state.

I looked up at the sky, considering. The moon rising to the east was a sliver off full, the air still, and the temperature was hardly cool enough to warrant more than a light blanket. I went back to the cabin to fetch my air mattress and sleeping bag.

By the time I got back, Shaw had rolled over so that his back was to the fire. Except for his soft breathing, one would think he was just a big golden-colored rise in the sand. I set out my mattress between him and the fire, lay my sleeping bag on top of that, and zipped myself in with my head resting on Shaw's flank.

The distant, ever-present sounds of griffins calling to each other, and their faint wing beats on the cool evening air all faded away in the susurrus of Shaw's purr as I rested my ear again his side. The moon continued to rise above where the fire still crackled, as if the

sparks and smoke thrown off were boosting it on its journey. I marveled at where I was; even with all the danger and stress of the mysteries surrounding me.

My eyes closed.

Dream-Esteban had asked me: *How could you leave me when you have all this?*

I don't know, I whispered. *How could I stay, when I would lose all of this here?*

As if in answer, I stood before the angry eyes of King Fitzwilliam's court. Lord Ivor and his son, the knight Sir Ivor, stared at me with hard, glittering eyes. The glitter was reflected in the field of cyan-hued cornflowers that grew all about me, preventing me from reaching the throne to appeal to the king. A *scratch* at the oaken doors to the throne room caused all eyes to turn to see who it was that demanded entry.

With a start, my eyes snapped open. The fire was down, almost out, and the moon hung much higher in the sky. Shaw remained asleep at my back, an inert, reassuringly warm mass. I peered blearily into the night. A mist had rolled in and clung to the ground, or at least it seemed to. I could hardly tell if I was awake or more than half asleep.

The scratching sound again. Closer now. Furtive. As if it were trying to approach without being seen.

At the edge of my vision, I made out a black shape in the fog. A pair of golden eyes gleamed at me, unwavering and intent.

A ripple ran through Shaw's body and he let out a truly awe-inspiring *belch* before settling back to sleep with a loud series of snores.

The eyes froze in their motion. Then they vanished, along with the dark shape.

I shivered. I meant to turn, to wake Shaw up.

Instead, it was his paw that shook me awake.

"Huh?" I grumbled, before realizing that Shaw's noble eagle head was framed against a bright sunrise the exact shade of ripe tangerine rind.

“Wake, Dayna. Thou canst be no sluggard today.”

I stretched and began rubbing my eyes. I tried to sort out what I’d dreamt versus what I’d seen last night. In the end, I had to ask myself the obvious question: *who or what could sneak into an aerie stocked to the brim with fully-grown griffins?*

I had no answer for that one. Maybe I’d dreamed the whole thing?

“I’m up, I’m up,” I said with a yawn. The fire had gone out, but I could probably use one of the MRE heating elements to warm up some of the slop that the U.S. Army called instant coffee.

“That much is good,” Shaw said gravely. “Tonight is the Rite of Autumn Winds. Which means that my offspring shall be here shortly to meet thee. Needs I must be elsewhere, for I do not wish to change their fighting focus from the Valkir Pride to me.”

Right. I got up and squinted into the sunrise, which had shifted color from tangerine to ripe, fleshy pink. It was the perfect color for a contest ‘to the blood’ day.

Frying pan, meet fire.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

I gave my three-foot long griffin *shillelagh* a twirl as I listened to Ironwood give out final commands to his lances.

I stood at the edge of the raised sparring platform, trying and mostly failing to keep my eyes off the far end of the field. The Valkir Pride had brought four lances of griffins to the match while Reyka remained with its core three. That meant Reyka was only slightly outnumbered at four to three. But the Valkir griffins had a certain grimness to their bearing that bothered me.

"Valkir has been testing several new tactics to try and beat us," Ironwood stated calmly, as he paced before the assembled lances. "My guess is that they are driven by desperation, since we've clouted them to the ground in every match since last autumn."

He got a chorus of upbeat feline yelps and avian chirrups in reply. I'd have thought that he was simply rallying the troops, but with gatherings this small, the truth was easy enough to ferret out. Shaw's children really had transformed this pride into a high-morale force.

"So, we need to stay flexible. Stay ready to shift at a moment's notice till we figure out what they are up to." Out in the audience, one gold-and-gray furred paw rose in response. Ironwood nodded. "My second wishes to speak her mind. Please, share your thoughts, Alfhild."

I recognized the gray-flecked griffin as the reeve who'd reported on the injured members of Ironwood's lance in the battle with the wyverns. She bowed and spoke again in the dignified voice of an older woman.

"Lance Captain, I never question thy plans," Alfhild said respectfully. "Yet this seems unlike thee. Leaving the initiative to the enemy."

"We follow the principle of the second-to-strike," Hollyhock corrected her. "We absorb the blow, understand what their objective is, and then take the offensive."

Interesting, I thought. *Humans would probably call that 'counterpunching'. Yet Alfhild has a point. The objective is already known. After all, I will be standing right under it.*

"My lance and I will be in first contact with the enemy," Ironwood declared. "Hollyhock shall defend the middle zone with the remaining two lances, ready to assist at the front or the rear as needed."

Blackthorn raised an eyebrow. "And I?"

"You get to be the inner defense. Any drake or reeve gets within your striking distance of the nest, I want you to crush them."

"That is acceptable to me." The larger griffin nodded tightly and flexed his talons in anticipation.

"One final word on this match: You all know that it is to the first blood. Battle madness, while not a thing to be feared, can easily get out of hand when blood is spilt. We must watch for this and not succumb."

A younger griffin off to my side spoke up. "Valkir will take no such cautions."

"Perhaps. But my siblings and I…we fly on disturbed winds right now with the Elders. The last thing I want right now is to spark a blood feud with another pride." He spread his wings and reared, forepaws slicing the air. "So, for the honor of the Reyka, let us show these fledglings *how flying and fighting is done!*"

A chorus of leonine roars and flapping wings followed him into the sky. Holly stayed back for a moment to give me some last-minute advice.

"Dayna, as the nest keeper, you should watch the sparring unfold," she began. "But should you see it draw past the midline of this field, retreat back to the safety of the columns. They are designed to slow a griffin's advance and force them to furl their wings. It will buy me enough time to come and help you, should any be stupid enough to challenge my brother Blackthorn."

"No worries there," I reassured her.

She took off in a flurry of wing beats, seeking to catch up to the two lances already aloft. Blackthorn banked in my direction, acknowledging my presence with a dip of his wings. I waved back as

he hovered for a moment in plain view, then slowly descended into the brush below and off to my right. To my surprise, only a few of the other remaining griffins of Reyka or Valkir remained in flight; the others also landed and went to ground.

Everything went creepily quiet for a solid minute. Then two.

Then five.

This was starting to feel a lot different than the match against Korlson.

A startled cry came from far off, in the underbrush. The sound of tussling, crunching branches, and griffin snarls. The noise died out, then the same thing happened further up the field. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a flash of white light from one of the ravines, right before another snarling cat-fight between two griffins broke out.

Suddenly the entire midfield erupted in a mass of wings and talons. The ranks of the Valkir rose as one against both Ironwood's single lance and Holly's two. The snap of jackhammer-tough beaks and the scrape of claw against claw rattled my nerves, even at a distance.

Soon, griffins began to fall away from the fight. One had a bloodied neck, another dropped from the sky with a badly gashed wing. The Valkir were fierce fighters, but I noted immediately that they were far from mindless. Their tactics were pinning the Reyka lances where they were. What's more, they were driving a wedge of warriors between Ironwood's group and Holly's larger one, keeping them separate and under such pressure that they could not use the Way of the Serpent.

A single thought sent a chill through me: I still hadn't seen Thundercrack, the only griffin on the field larger even than Blackthorn. Something told me that I better get under cover of the columns by the nest's flag. I listened to that something as I gripped the handle of my club more tightly and found it slick with sweat.

I'd taken maybe three steps back when the Lance Captain of the Valkir Pride erupted from the tree line at the base of the platform. He let out a gut-churning roar that belonged in a monster movie. His

razor-sharp beak and claws were fully extended and reaching out for me like something out of my worst nightmares.

I can be brave sometimes, but not that brave. I let out a shriek of my own and tried to run. My movements felt as if I were wading through fresh tar. So slow. Too slow. The look in that griffin's eyes said nothing about stopping with a single taste of my blood, either.

A darker gold blur hit my attacker in mid-leap.

Blackthorn's midair tackle slammed the two into the corner pillar, snapping the stone column off at its corroded base. The impact knocked me to my knees, both of which would have been badly skinned had I not swapped out my work slacks for jeans. The sour taste of rock dust filled my mouth. I scrambled as quickly as I could for the center of the platform and backed up against the column holding the banner. The branches of the thorn bush at the base of the column crackled under my shoes and scratched at my ankles. Worse, the banner's cloth made an annoyingly loud snap in the breeze, and I reached up my free hand to still it.

The cloud of dust from the falling column finally settled. I peered through the remaining pillars to see Blackthorn's form, lying still on the outer platform. His chest moved, so he wasn't dead, at least. But Thundercrack had done something I'd thought impossible. He'd knocked out one of the fiercest griffin warriors I'd ever seen, taking him down like a lightweight.

My gaze swung down one row of columns, then the other.

I didn't see the Valkir leader anywhere. That was impossible, unless…

My fingers closed on the banner where I held the bottom corner in one hand. I jerked the cloth down from where it hung as hard as I could. It fell around my head, draping over my shoulders like a red and black poncho.

I ducked as a shadow dropped out of nowhere to perch atop the central pillar. Talons raked the air just inches above my head. I let out another definitively non-heroic shriek as I struck out blindly overhead with my club. It was a clumsy, backward overhead swing, but it connected.

A sound like someone's knuckle cracking rent the air, then a high-pitched yelp, followed by a snarl that wouldn't have been out of place from a lion carving out his place on the Serengeti. Only this lion talked as well.

"I'll take first blood from you for that," Thundercrack snarled as he shook his injured forepaw, annoyed. "Just one cut. But no one said how deep I could make it!"

His body supported by the pillars around me, he danced from column top to column top as I fought to stay away from him. He reached down like a cat trying to pull a mouse from a hole, his claws gouging deep scrapes in the stone around me. The dust he kicked up choked me, and at his next lunge I dropped down to my already smarting knees to avoid his killing grasp. The only thing keeping him from finishing the job was his great size; where another griffin could slip through the pillars, he had to remain atop the entire nest structure. But even so, he kept on shoving his forepaw and shoulder into any gap he could, coming closer on every lunge.

Then a second shadow appeared overhead against the sun. With a shriek, Holly swooped in from above and to the side, raking Thundercrack's flank. Shavings of gold-brown fur floated down to my level as the larger griffin was bowled off the side of the platform.

"Yield, Captain of the Valkir!" Holly snarled. "Your warriors are marked with first blood, and so are you!"

"Not till I take your blood in turn!" he snarled back. The two griffins faced off, Holly smaller and with the higher ground atop the pillars, Thundercrack larger and harder to reach. "Try your martial art on me, child of pride, child of arrogance! The Valkir do not watch others' tails!"

A thought struck me. If Thundercrack couldn't be distracted by the Way of the Serpent, why not something else?

I set down the club and pulled the banner from around my neck. Then I twisted it tight. The two griffins were still at a standoff as I stepped out to the edge of the pillars. Holding the cloth between my thumb and forefinger, one hand kept tight against my chest, I whipped my makeshift towel out to flick the very edge of Thundercrack's long,

lion tail.

It was a poor slap, something he probably barely even felt. But it was enough. The drake's head turned. His beak opened in a snarl of recognition and anger.

Holly leapt forward. Talons extended, she grabbed the bigger griffin's head in her paws. For a split second, I thought she was going to try and break his neck.

Instead, she put on a last burst of speed with her wings and slammed Thundercrack's head to the stone floor of the platform with a resounding *crunch*. The Lance Captain's limbs moved spasmodically for a second, then went still.

Even though he'd just been trying to maim me, or worse, I ran over to the fallen griffin. I shifted one of his burly forepaws out of the way so I could put an ear to his chest. His fur smelled of musk and ocean spray, but it was short and fine against my earlobe. Dimly, I heard the steady beat of his heart.

I relaxed a bit. Griffins were simply incredibly tough customers when all was said and done.

Holly, on the other hand, had gotten angrier. I heard her squawking and raised my gaze from Thundercrack's still form to where she harangued the now conscious Blackthorn. Her sibling looked more annoyed than anything else as he rubbed the side of his neck with a paw.

"Stupid, stupid! How could that lout have knocked you out that way?" she hissed at him. "What were you thinking?"

He scowled. "Only about what must be done."

"Not unless I am–"

"I am ashamed," Blackthorn said loudly, cutting Holly off. "Dayna, I have failed you. I was taken in by a trick. I fell in battle. Lucky you were nest keeper. Else we would have lost."

"You didn't get taken in," I reassured the crestfallen drake. "That just looked like bad luck to me, the way you two hit the columns."

"Yes, bad luck," he agreed quickly.

"And bad luck that Thundercrack here suffered battle madness at the end," Holly said, giving me a meaningful look.

I paused. Thundercrack had sounded like he'd wanted to get me, true. But he'd also sounded pretty darned coherent for someone who was 'suffering madness'. Then again, honor was at stake here, and Ironwood was concerned about the start of a blood feud. So, my guess was that Holly was trying to save everyone's face.

The Valkir had put up a good enough fight to bring them back some of their lost honor. I still had my swab samples. And as for Thundercrack, no one could blame him for being a little over-zealous in his pursuit of victory if he'd had a temporary bout of insanity. Everyone ended up with something. Hopefully that included a concussion for the Lance Captain, but I would take what I could get.

"Yes," I said, and Holly's expression brightened as she realized that I had 'gotten it'. "It was definitely a stroke of bad luck. No one could blame him if his blood was up, and victory so nearly in hand. Or talon."

"Or talon," Holly agreed. She moved to my side, motioning for me to mount. "Let us go, Dayna."

I got on board as best as I could, handing the banner over to Blackthorn as I did so. "Where are you planning on taking me, Holly?"

"First to your cabin, to pick up your magic brush kits." I could hear the smile in her voice as she added, "But afterwards…we fly to the Rite of the Autumn Winds."

As I felt the push of her strong legs and stronger wings catapult us from the ground, I realized that I'd just helped the Reyka pride to its win over the Valkir. My chest filled with the feeling of exhilaration and lightness, and for a moment I thought: *There could be worse things than to be in the Air Cavalry if I had Holly as my friend and mount.*

Maybe Shaw was right. Maybe I did speak as one hatched from the egg.

Maybe there was more than a little griffin in me now.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Holly turned on one wingtip into the wind, steering us away from the griffin aerie. We were joined along the route by a multitude of other griffins. My ears were buffeted by the sounds of wing beats as we merged into the vastness of the gold-furred and white-feathered prides. The sky turned from the blue of the morning to a deep aquamarine as we drew close to the border of the Griffin Lands.

We flew over a sound or fjord that arrowed away to the north. Puffs of vapor rose from the water. I leaned over as far as I dared and spotted a pod of black and white whales breaching as their route passed under ours. They could have been orcas, but in Andeluvia they could also have been an intelligent species all their own.

Streamers of purple smoke rose from the base of a clump of mountains on the west side of the sound. As we drew closer, I realized that the smoke rose from nine roaring bonfires set at intervals along a wide sandy beach. Each fire supported a blackened metal tray the size of a barn door. Branches laden with red and gold leaves crackled merrily on the makeshift braziers, filling the air with the promising scent of freshly cut apples.

The mass of griffins landed, split roughly equally amongst the nine fires. One of the council members sat or reclined on a raised dais in front of each of the smoke columns. In the middle distance I spotted Belladonna, reclining as if she were a bedraggled eagle-lion goddess. Holly had chosen the fire presided over by Elder Ulrik. The older drake sat regally in his spot like a statue before an ancient Egyptian temple.

Holly landed next to a fallen, half-buried tree trunk and patted the surface with one outstretched wing. I slung the packs containing my swab kits over my shoulder and dismounted while she smoothed out a spot in the sand to stretch out. All around us, griffins were making themselves comfortable in similar fashion.

“What do we do now?” I whispered. There was no specific reason

for me to keep my voice low. But it just seemed proper, given the expectant feeling in the air.

"When the spicewood burns down to the embers, then is the time for the telling of the family sagas," Holly replied. "This is one part of what draws our people back from all over Andeluvia."

"Griffins really are travelers."

"Many of our kind travel, few wander," Holly mused. "That's one of the old sayings, anyway. But that is the way of our kind. Plus, few of us are smiths, farmers, or good with crafts. Rather, we excel at hunting, flying and fighting, so we barter our skills with many countries in exchange for metalwork, goods we cannot create easily, or service in kind."

I nodded, thinking of the arrangement the griffins had with the nation of Kescar. Obviously, one of the plum assignments was to be part of Fitzwilliam's Air Cavalry. "You said the saga was one part of what drew griffins. What are the other reasons?"

A throaty laugh. "You shall see. It is not hard to figure out."

The griffins off to our right passed around a huge, dual-handled white cup. The size and shape allowed each griffin to grasp the container easily with their lion paws. Also, it let them each take a deep drink of the contents before they passed it on to the next person.

"That is the sacred drink made from spicewood," Holly said, as the cup came our way. "You will be the first human in many years to have tried it."

Hopefully I won't be the first human in many years to have died from drinking it, my mind helpfully supplied, but I pushed that thought away. Griffins could tolerate eating and drinking a lot of things I'd categorize as 'inedible'. But I trusted Holly's judgement, so I didn't think I'd need transformation into a magical deer to try the spicewood drink.

I wasn't strong enough to handle a cup the size of a sports trophy, so when it came to my turn, Holly helped me hold the vessel as I put my lips to the blood-red mixture inside and took a big *slurp*. I nodded, let go of my end, and she took a long drink of her own.

I swirled the liquid around my tongue and then swallowed. The

brothlike substance was tart and herbal at the same time. In fact, it reminded me of a stew I'd had at a back-alley place in Chicago's Little Sicily. I immediately felt a flush of good feelings pervade my insides.

"Take note as to what my father is doing," Holly said with a nod. Sure enough, Grimshaw was working his way among the different fires, speaking with several griffins and pointing in my direction. "He does not wish to antagonize his True Born so he keeps his distance, but he is busy sending all the newly arrived warriors over to you for your magic test."

"He wants me to test them here, now?"

"It is the best and only place. All the warriors are here. They will be much too distracted or tired later on."

"But what of the family sagas?"

"Talk and revelry are expected," she reassured me. "Elder Ulrik knows your task, he shall not take offense if you work while he speaks."

I certainly hoped that, under Holly and Shaw's guidance, I wasn't committing any major faux pas. Griffin warriors began to politely line up, waiting for me to perform my test. I hastily set up my kits on the wide, flat surface of the fallen tree and motioned for the first to approach. The warriors were of many different ages and dress – some wore armor, others headdresses and earrings similar to Belladonna's, while most eschewed any ornamentation other than stripes of colorful war paint.

The fire from the braziers had dimmed down and the smoke turned to lavender when Elder Ulrik abruptly rose, stood upon his hind legs, and spread his wings to the sky. At the other fires, the remaining Elders performed similarly.

"Harken unto me," he chanted, his voice echoing what was heard at the other fires. "For this night, the night we celebrate the turn of the season to harvest and blood moon, we shall tell the saga of the Dagfinnar family."

A couple of the griffins around our fire let out raucous caws of approval. Similar noises came from the other gatherings, though I'd heard distinctly different names spoken there. Holly spoke quickly

before the noises of excitement died down.

"Every year, each Elder chooses which family saga they wish to tell," she explained. "You are in luck. The family that Ulrik picked this year has a long, fabled history. You will have plenty to listen to as you work."

She wasn't kidding about that. While the pace of my testing was slow, it was steady and unrelenting as more and more griffins arrived from all points of the compass. In the meantime, Elder Ulrik spoke in his deep, steady voice about feats, births, and battles. I don't know if I could have followed the multi-hour saga if my full attention had been on it. But it was interesting stuff, rather like having a radio show in the background at work. Obviously, I missed lot of the cultural fill-ins that had the griffin audience gasping in shock or rollicking in laughter. But I did my best to make out the gist of it.

The Dagfinnar came, like the rest of the fabled griffins, from the far shore of the Weatherglass Sea. They dueled the great drake Reyka to a draw, honoring the legendary pride founder by pledging their service to him and something called the Alliance of the Four Winds.

Reyka and the Dagfinnar had innumerable adventures: finding the source of the Eastern wind, seeking the resting place of the North Star, flying in the service of a lord or a country long since vanished into the mists of time. Often, the griffins in the story would encounter monsters I'd never heard of, battle to the last, and leave said monsters splattered in meaty chunks all over the ground.

Like human audiences, these action parts were the ones that went over big. Unlike human audiences, descriptions of the heroes gobbling up said meaty chunks went over even bigger.

The sun finally dipped below the horizon, the sky purpling over towards black as I finished the last griffin in line. That was a good thing, because while Ulrik continued his story, the audience had grown more rowdy.

It wasn't that the griffins had gotten restless. Rather, the spicewood drink, which made the rounds many more times, seemed to have made both drakes and reeves less inhibited, though not reeling drunk. All along the beach groups wandered away from the fire,

forming and re-forming into good-natured clashes of beak and talon, letting out cries and calls that echoed all along the shores of the sound.

"Holly," I said, as I realized something needed to be done. "I forgot, I need to–"

She remained rooted to the spot, her thoughts elsewhere. Perhaps it was the spicewood drink, but I didn't think she even heard me. I nudged her gently on one shoulder until she turned her head.

"My mind was busy preening," she said, with a shake of her head. "What is it?"

"I just realized something. I have all the Reyka Pride's samples but those of your brothers."

"They attend, but are on patrol duty tonight."

"Even on the night of the Autumn Winds?"

"No matter the revelry, griffins do not lightly put down their guard!" she snapped, as if I'd suddenly annoyed her. "Give your magic brushes to me and I will handle it."

I quickly wrote names on the swab kit slips, explained what went where, and then held the entire bundle out. She snatched them up in her talons. "Holly, I didn't mean to offend you."

"No matter. I know how to use your brushes, I've seen it done enough times." And with that, she took off into the darkening sky to seek out her siblings.

Elder Ulrik finally fell silent to muffled stamps of approval by his griffin audience. To my surprise, he held his forepaw out to me, indicating that I should stay where I was, then sent griffins loping to the other fires. In no time, they brought back the other eight Elders to join me in a great gray-furred and armored line. Grimshaw brought up the rear next to Ulrik, an expectant look on his eagle face.

The High Elder strode up to me, her white lion-fur as glistening and sleek as her eagle head feathers were mangy and tattered. The beads in her headdress clattered as she spoke up in her scratchy voice.

"So, outworlder!" Belladonna demanded. "How goes thy campaign to corrupt my people?"

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Chapter Thirty

I was ready for this.

In fact, I'd expected the High Elder to be checking in on me more often.

"My plans are going well, Eldest," I reported. "Your most trustworthy griffins are bending to my will."

"So, 'tis as I thought: thou art instead finding that we griffins are a tough people to crack."

"Truly, your vision is keen. This is a challenge, even for my powers."

One of Belladonna's earrings jangled as she cocked her head. "Though I know thou art apt to lie when bending others' wills to yours…what mysterious and inscrutable powers dost thou employ?"

"Um…well, I can't really say. Because my powers are, after all… inscrutable. And mysterious."

"I knew it!"

"Eldest…" Shaw called, motioning with a forepaw.

"Yes, yes," Belladonna groused. "To show that we remain manifestly unafraid of thy powers, the Council of Elders has decided to allow thee to use thy magic on them."

Well, that was unexpected. But not unwelcome. I quickly dug into the dwindling supply of kits I had remaining and did buccal swabs on each of the Elders. Shaw came up last, and I did his with a quick whisper in his ear.

"Thanks, Shaw."

He made a noncommittal grunt until I finishing swabbing the inside of his cheek.

"Thou hast made a fine impression on the Elders," he said quietly, when I had packaged up the swab. "I must accompany them all this evening. They have openly said that they are pleased with thy participation in the Rites tonight."

I found myself beaming at that. "Well, I wanted to experience

everything a griffin can."

A soft chuckle. "Those who are not griffins would find the next part difficult, to say the least."

Leaving me even more puzzled, Shaw followed the Elders as they continued their course along the expanse of beach. I stacked my completed kits next to me on the sandblasted wood surface and watched the moon rise into a sky of midnight blue shot through with the same streaks of purple rising from the bonfires.

The milling groups of griffins from all along the beach had taken to the sky while I'd been completing my last swab tests. Now, their movements had taken on new qualities. The beat of wings became more frenzied, more energetic. But at the same time, to my eye, the groups had become synchronized, moving in complex patterns that I could only just make out. Each group came together into a dense mass. Then one after another, the groups broke apart like fighter jets exploding out of formation.

I watched the closest group, hypnotized by the aerial dance.

A single griffin would ascend to the heavens, surrounded by four or five others who circled around in a tight spiral. Then, at some predetermined point high in the sky, one of the circling members would strike out with their talons, locking claws with the lone griffin. A tumble of feathers, fur, and wings were all I could see as the pair plunged to earth.

Suddenly, before they reached the ground, the two would separate in a burst of unfurled wing, and the cycle would begin again.

It took me only a moment to realize that this wasn't just an aerial dance. The single griffin at the center of it all was a female, an adult reeve. The rest, the mass of circlers, were male.

It was a *mating* ritual.

One in which partners locked beak and talon in a death dive, only to recover as the ground rose disturbingly close.

I found it entrancing. *Exhilarating*, even.

And to be completely honest…I wasn't sure how much of my interest came from the fact that I'd been going through my own dry spell.

The undulations of the groups became faster. The males spiraled tighter to the females, the plunges ending closer and closer to the ground.

Finally, on a plunge that ended up so heart-stoppingly close to the beach that the hovering pair kicked up a blizzard of sand, the dance ended. And though the preceding part was thoroughly eagle-like in its rapturous mid-air dancing, the culmination was purely feline.

For griffins, the climax of the moment came in the manner of a pride of lions, or a glaring of domestic shorthair cats. The female landed, tail slashing the air in eyeblink fast Z-patterns. Her powerful rear legs spread, her rump raised invitingly.

Her partner on the last dive had become fully erect. His organ swelled to its full length and he buried himself in her in a single thrust. The act itself was fast, punctuated with an avian screech from the male and an echoing feline snarl by the female. She turned as best she could, slashing at him viciously with her foreclaws. He disengaged with a massive beat of his wings, lifting himself just out of range of a killing blow.

Then another male took his place. He too thrust himself into place, driving himself and his mate to climax in less than ten seconds. Then a third, and another, and another.

I looked around to see that the remaining dancers had moved their action to the beach as well. In one case, the lone female and her four suitors all lay out on the sand, already deep in the bliss of post-coital sleep. Two of the drakes bore triple claw marks across their faces, but they didn't seem to be concerned about it. In griffin society, that was probably the equivalent of getting a hickey.

Another grouping continued, though with more tenderness than I'd seen with the others. The female on the sand coupled with one male, while allowing the others to stroke her flanks with their wings, or rub their beaks sensuously along her feathered cheeks. The expressions of sheer bliss shone out, even from the severe-featured eagle faces.

A beat of wings and a shower of sand came from my side as Holly rejoined me. She furled her wings and handed me my remaining swab

kits.

"This took some doing," she said. "I'd guess that you haven't been bored?"

"I'd be lying if I said I was," I replied, as I stashed the kits away.

Understatement of the year, I thought. *Being a first-person witness to a griffin orgy definitely had not been on my to-do list for the day.*

That said, Holly had been gone for while. It made me wonder, so I decided to ask a question that I hoped wouldn't put me back in hot water with her. She reminded me in so many ways of Shaw, but her temperament remained mysteriously mercurial.

"So…did you join in? I mean, with the activities." I made a vague gesture skyward, where a lot of erotic play continued.

"The activities? You mean, did I have *sex*?"

Her directness reminded me of her father as well. "Ah…yes, that's what I meant."

She laughed ruefully.

"Nay, I did not. True Born are…typically not welcome in these circumstances." She saw the expression on my face and quickly added, "Do not think that I dislike the act of mating – far from it! Mating is done between griffins in many situations, not just at the Autumn Rites."

That made sense, actually. To think otherwise would be as silly as if Hollyhock concluded that all human mating was done in the honeymoon suite, or in the back seat of a car. But she had misinterpreted my expression; I wanted one of my questions finally answered.

"That's not what I was getting at. It's just, you're mentioning this 'True Born' thing again. I want to put a pin in this once and for all, now that I have my swabs."

"All right." She seemed agreeable enough now, to the point of settling down comfortably in the sand next to me. "What do you wish to know?"

I took a moment to review the facts I had in my mind before I spoke.

"Before I came here, I was told that a griffin had no question as to

their parentage. I'm trying to figure out why." I nodded off to the side, where one lusty reeve was taking her sixth or seventh lover of the night. "You might know your mother, but you could never truly know who your father is. And when I met Linden a couple of days ago, Shaw said that she was one of the sixteen who counted him as their 'named sire'. That implies something," I said, as my mind put the pieces together a little *click*. "That implies *choice*, doesn't it?"

Holly nodded, looking a bit surprised at my insight, and let me continue.

"So, if you know your birth mother…but you get to choose who you count as your father…then of course you'll never have to guess about your parentage."

It was a very griffin-like way to view the world, I realized.

Much like the lack of distinction between whether one *could not* see through a wall, or one *should not* – to a griffin it was one and the same. Whether or not a given drake was your father, if you *believed* it was so, that made it biologically true to this species.

"When we reach the age of the gryphlet," Holly confirmed, "We learn who could have sired our egg. It is for us to select the champion, the drake that we admire the most, the one we wish to be like upon our adulthood. My sire comes from a long line, with many heroic deeds. He has been the honored mount of a Captain in the Andeluvian Air Cavalry, and has gained even more fame under you. It is to no one's surprise that so many fledglings select Grimshaw the Great."

The night breeze tussled the violet smoke that rose from the nearby brassier, filling my nose with the scent of ripe apples again. "That's still only half the story. If choice is what defines a typical griffin's parentage, then that must be *lacking* for a True Born."

Holly's eyes glowed golden in the firelight. "Your mind does make interesting banks and swoops. And yet, it does nab its prey in its talons. You are correct. Sometimes, when there is a special love between griffins, the reeve forsakes all other suitors for an entire cycle and dances only with him. My mother Ingoldir felt to such a degree for Grimshaw that she did this for him no less than three separate times. This exclusivity, this pair bonding, I assume that it takes place

sometimes with you humans too?"

"It's been known to happen," I said dryly, but I refused to deviate from the subject at hand. "And so from those three …Ironwood was born. Then Blackthorn. And finally, you."

"Even so. There were several years between each of our births. Ingoldir was advanced in age for breeding when she placed my egg in the nest. It weakened her, so that she passed on from a wasting disease by the time I had my first flight feathers."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"There is nothing to apologize for. She returned to the Eternal Sky on her own, as it should be, and her life was honored and celebrated. Yet, here is where we griffins have a twist in our nature. A flaw in our character."

Holly's voice had taken on an unmistakable edge as she continued.

"The act of submitting oneself to bear a True Born is celebrated. But the resulting chick is not. Some say that having True Born is an act of self-importance, of overbearing pride in one's accomplishments."

I remembered Thundercrack's insults before Holly had beaten him down: *Try your martial art on me, child of pride, child of arrogance!*

"So, a True Born may find himself – or herself – shunned from many things. Friends and allies are almost impossible to make. Martial schools make it difficult for you to enter, easy to fail and leave."

"That's just one True Born. I can only imagine what it was like to be the youngest of three."

Holly let out a sigh. "My brothers and I were always thrown together, and so that was how we survived. I made my own family. Or at least tried to. The disdain and resentment…it forced us to be better, stronger warriors and leaders than any before us. That shall count for something in the end, I think."

"I'm sure it will," I said. Admittedly, that sounded patronizing, so I tried to follow it up. "No matter your feelings, your father is extremely proud of what you have done. He counts you as the best among griffins."

"I am too flawed to be the 'best'," she demurred, before fixing me

in her golden headlamp glare. “But I am no dullard, Dayna. Do not think that because you know different magic, because you are from another world, that I am of slower wit or weaker of will than you.”

My mouth went dry in an instant. “I would never think that.”

Holly’s expression was unreadable. “In that case, to use your phrase, ‘level’ with me. Why are you *really* here?”

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Chapter Thirty-One

Why are you *really* here?

My mouth refused to move. I almost hated myself for that. Holly wasn't even a suspect any more in my mind, as her feathers lacked the color that marked the griffin on the tape. And she had helped bring me into the innermost workings of the griffin realm.

But I still couldn't let her know about what had happened in Los Angeles. It wasn't personal, I kept telling myself that. It was business. Law enforcement business.

But then I thought of how Shaw had handled Elder Ulrik. Maybe I could skirt the line a little. Holly deserved that much at least.

"The health of the griffin warriors is one reason," I began. "But I can't say it's the only one. It's not even a large part of why I am here. Are you…familiar with the rantings of High Elder Belladonna?"

"Yes," Holly confirmed. "Even when scoffed at, they spread like dander-seeds on the wind through the aerie."

"Do you think there is any substance to them? The idea of old powers stirring in the dark somewhere?"

"Oh, aye," She nodded vigorously. "I think it's a real threat."

"You…do?" I asked, sounding slow on the uptake. "Okay, I didn't expect you to say that."

"My siblings don't sit atop our nests and sing about it. As you are aware, the Elders do not believe in Belladonna's visions. And the Elders are not keen on my brothers or myself right now, either."

Holly craned her neck to one side, then the other, ensuring that we were well enough alone to talk. She need not have worried. Right now, anyone not busy getting it on was lying asleep in a very pleasant dream state. Satisfied, she went on.

"Ironwood and I have long suspected the Valkir Pride of seeking magical help outside the aerie for their cause. It is why we have volunteered for as many patrols and guard positions as possible – as with tonight, the least popular night to be on guard duty. You can

certainly appreciate why."

I nodded. *That, and from what Holly tells me, being a True Born is a great way to get snubbed at the griffin equivalent of the High School Prom.*

"We have been watching Thundercrack and others of the Valkir leave to train outside of the griffin lands. They take training equipment where they should not. They return with artifacts which are never shared nor shown outside their part of the aerie. I suspect that these are items of magic."

Immediately, that white flash I thought I saw during the pride-spar came to mind. But something else jumped out at me first that I had to ask about. "This training equipment. What kind are we talking about?"

"Armor. Breastplates and headgear, mostly. And once, a pair of gauntlets. Those are special armor we wear over our forelimbs, in case you didn't–"

"I know what those are," I said eagerly. "Tell me more about when they took that last item outside the aerie."

"Ten days ago, Thundercrack took a pair of gauntlets from the armory and back to his pride."

"Your father said that your armory doesn't keep records. How would you know about this?"

"They do not," Holly agreed sagely. "I know, because I was serving in the armory at the time. I was the one who both gave out and took back the armor piece. When it was borrowed, Thundercrack vanished from the aerie for two whole days. When he returned, he looked gaunt from flying and the equipment was strangely marked. It disturbed me, because I remember him becoming more vainglorious, more talkative than usual."

"What did he say?"

Holly made a scowl of distaste. "Much of what has always spilled out of that one's beak: pretentious brags about the power of his pride. About how senile and useless the current Council of Elders is. He said...that the Valkir had friends now. Dark ones. I thought it mere boasting…but perhaps, judging by your questions, it was not boasting of the idle sort."

“Maybe. If the Valkir Pride wants to abolish the current ruling council…” I considered. “I know that it’s very rare for a griffin to be dishonorable. But Thundercrack and his pride would at least have *motive*. That counts for a lot in my line of work, which is solving crime.”

“Is that a dangerous kind of work?”

“It can be.”

“That would explain your courage. And, perhaps, your dragon-hand device.”

“My dragon-hand…oh, you mean my gun.”

“Whatever name it is given, it did save my life during the attack on the Kescari beach.”

“Not just your life. For a while there I was worried about my own life as well. Those two wyverns in the ravine would have killed both of us.”

“It’s a good thing there wasn’t a third, or fourth! What would you have done?”

“Well, I always carry a spare magazine – that’s what we call a container with extra bullets – around with me. But it takes a few seconds to put it in place.”

“I am most grateful that you carry that device. Because without it, I would not have survived long enough for us to have gotten to know each other. Even if you cannot tell me directly why you have chosen to visit. That you seek to fight the old powers of the dark is enough.”

Was it enough? I somehow doubted it.

“There is so much I enjoy about your world.” I looked off into the light cast by the moon and the fires. It was easy enough to see the silhouettes of griffins as they lazed about, lying pleasantly exhausted on the sand. “I have a job to complete for mine. And for King Fitzwilliam. If I cannot, then I will be banished.”

“I thought that he, like many others, valued your counsel.”

“The king does, but his court of Andeluvian noblemen don’t feel the same way.”

A griffin chuckle. “You and I do share some similar turns on the wheel of fate, then. You with your nobles, I with my elders.”

“I never thought of it that way, but you have a point. As to who else values my counsel, that’s an open question.”

“My father is one,” Holly insisted. “He has spoken of your helping others to see their true worth, to unkink the twist of destiny that life has brought them.”

“That’s happened, true. Mostly it’s just been because I’m a good listener.”

Holly stared into the glow of the nearby brazier for a while before speaking again. “Have you ever offered counsel for someone…who did something for love? Something that others might find questionable?”

I looked over at her, but she didn’t return my gaze. “I suppose that I’ve had a few words for my sister, back when we still talked to each other. I think that I was the one who got more counseling for doing ‘questionable’ stuff like that than anyone else, though.”

“Really? The courageous heart of the Dragon-Hand? I am shocked!”

Her voice had a gentle teasing tone to it, so I decided to go with it. “When I was seventeen – that’s probably like being a fledgling, or a gryphlet – I started going out with a college guy. He was handsome, sure, but I think I was attracted to his seriousness, the way he was so calm and steady. Mom and Dad heard about it, went a little crazy, and forbade me from ever seeing him again.”

Holly fluttered her wings a tiny bit, in what I think was a griffin form of laughter. “I think I understand. You were of questionable maturity to mate, he was your senior. You looked up to him as a new lance member to a Lance Captain.”

“Um…sure, close enough. I told my parents to keep out of my business, I knew well enough what to do in my life. Anyway…my date took me out one evening and brought me back home a little high, a lot drunk, and at two in the morning. All three of those things were big no-nos in my family. And even worse, he decides to start making out with me…right as we’re parked in front of my parents’ house.”

“Does ‘making out’ mean mating?”

“I guess it would be like the aerial dance your people do, right before the actual event.” I felt my cheeks redden, though I couldn’t

figure out why. Holly wasn't judging me, and from what I'd seen, the actual act of sex was a very similar 'insert tab A into slot B' for both of our species.

"So what happened?"

"My parents heard something, probably me moaning, and came outside to investigate. My father's got this patrolman's flashlight on him – that's a light source that's the size of one of your clubs. He threatened to talon-pop my date if I didn't get out of the car just then. After that, my dad made it very clear that he still had a hunting rifle in the garage which he'd clean and oil if my date ever gave him a reason.

"And…he didn't. I know that he'd have jumped at the chance to see me again – college guys all seem to have a thing for high school girls – but even I had figured out that this was trouble. He wanted to go all the way…I mean, to go ahead and mate with me. Come to think of it, I'd have put up a lot less resistance at that point than any of the females on this beach. And that could have been a disaster."

"He could have left you with a chick on the way, you mean."

"Yup. Chick on the way, bun in the oven, preggers, however you want to say it."

Holly absently raked the sand with one of her forepaws. "Is unapproved egg laying a source of shame in your world?"

"Let's just say that it makes life difficult." And right then the urge to yawn came over me. I stretched my arms, trying to ward it off, but it came out all the same. "Sorry about that. It's been a long day, as you know."

"Indeed it has. The Rites have concluded, and you have your magic brushes to study, do you not?" I nodded, and Holly placed her paw on my shoulder. "Then I shall bid you a fair return to your world, and let my father know to pick you up on the morning after next."

I fumbled for the silver medallion that Galen had enchanted for me. "Cross your talons for luck. I should have what I need for us to deal with Thundercrack and the Valkir Pride by then."

With that, I grasped the medallion between my forefingers. Holly and the rest of the griffins winked out in a familiar blaze of white.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

With a shove, the softpack envelope stuffed to bursting with my remaining buccal brush tests finally went down the overnight mail chute. It would cost a bit more than my lunch money to get all this testing done, but it would still prove valuable – especially if the video evidence had been compromised in any way. But that little knot in my stomach dissolved away as I got back to my office. A little storage drive labeled *MUSEUM FOOTAGE – DELIVER TO DAYNA CHRISSIE, O.M.E.* lay on my desk.

I pocketed the drive and took a seat behind the ever-mounting piles of paper, feeling more than a little like a soldier sitting in a well-sandbagged foxhole. With a sigh, I started on the pile nearest my right hand, the one I'd labeled with a yellow stickie note as 'Urgent!'. The minute hand began its second crawl around the dial as I finally got to the bottom of the pile.

"May the Lord have mercy," came a familiar drawl. "Is that an eight-by-eleven inch open patch of desk I see there?"

I looked up to see Shelly Richardson leaning against my doorframe. She held a manila envelope thick with yet more paperwork in the crook of one elbow. Shelly was a transplanted Texan with a similarly Lone Star sized heart she tended to wear on her sleeve. But her sturdy frame looked fragile, and her eyes didn't sparkle the way they normally did behind her glasses.

"You might want to take a picture of it before it's gone," I joked. But before I could say anything else, my friend looked over her shoulder to check the hallway, then closed the office door behind her.

"Dayna," she said, as she slipped into the visitor's chair I'd placed conveniently close to the cookie jar, "It looks like I need to give you the heads-up. Especially if someone 'round here starts asking questions."

My heart sank a bit at that. It felt like I'd only wrangled my field privileges back yesterday, and things just kept getting worse. Between

Esteban, Ollivar, the museum heist they'd saddled me with, not to mention the problems in Andeluvia…

"Let me guess. I'm in trouble with the department. Again."

"Well…not yet. But I *am* troubled, if y'all get my meaning."

"Sort of. Well, no. Maybe you just need to level with – I mean, lay it out for me."

"The OME department auditors are going through everyone's records, and yours…well, they're gettin' more than a fair share of attention." She pulled the folder from under her arm, opened it, and began spreading out the contents. "They've already cited the fact that you were unable to I.D. our 'Connor McCloud' character, even after a repeated physical examination. Then there was the deal where you got put on probation by our very own Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy."

"And he's planning to toss his hat into the ring to become Chief of Police. Something tells me that this audit's timing is more than just luck."

"Bob ain't no plum pudding, bless his little heart. He's still fuming over how that probation hearing of yours turned out." Shelly flicked through her papers, finding the ones she wanted as she added, "Now here's the newest wrinkle. The lab folks sent me two reports to discuss with you. The first lists the substances found on a pair of ventilation duct filters. There's nothing material or microbial out of the ordinary, so whatever you were looking for, it didn't show up. But…it's the second report that's got their undies in a twist."

I did my best not to grimace. I knew it had to do with the samples I'd taken off the griffin feather that Lieutenant Ollivar had handed me.

"They're asking if we can hire a more competent person to handle the samples," Shelly said grimly. "I'll speak up for you, you know that. But they're more than halfway sure that you're playin' a prank."

"They're complaining about contamination, aren't they?"

"Whole hog contamination, and from the city zoo, to boot. Some of the tests are showing genetic markers from big cats. Others indicate that you sent 'em a swab from the local aviary. And on top of that… people are talking about your request to reduce your hours. They may pull your field privileges back, give you more menial work, like crime

scene cleanup."

I leaned forward and massaged my temples with a groan. I simply *didn't* need this right now. Not when my only other option rested on the outcome of a mysterious crystal theft, the shaky whims of the Andeluvian nobility, and the even shakier sanity of a griffin High Elder.

"Dayna…" Shelly whispered. "There's…more."

I looked up.

Confusion and worry creased Shelly's face. Her fingers trembled as she closed the folder and then knotted them together in her lap. The circles under her eyes were dark enough to be mistaken for pools of fresh tar.

"More?" I came around the desk in a flash and knelt in front of her chair. I grabbed my friend's hands in mine. My words tumbled out as I felt their cold clamminess. "Shelly, are you all right? When did you last have something to eat?"

"I haven't had any appetite for the last week. Supper just hasn't tasted any good since…I mean, I've been drinking my water. Keepin' it down, for the most part. I know I've been out sick a lot. That's not good." She tried out a wan smile. "Took some caffeine pills to come in today. I'm no java junkie like you, I can't down a whole pot of the stuff."

I felt her cold fingers continue to quiver. "How many pills did you take?"

"I dunno. Seven, eight since I got up, maybe."

"Jesus," I breathed. "Have you been getting any sleep at all?"

"Some. But I just can't…it just ain't restful at all. That's the 'more' I meant. It's not about the department, it just has something to do with you."

My mouth went dry, sour tasting.

"With me," I repeated stupidly. "What do you mean?"

Her voice took on a dejected tone. "I keep havin' variations of the same dream, over and over again. You're in most all of them. There's a big black horse there, too. And a beautiful little reindeer fawn. Or a calf with antlers glued to its head, going 'moo'."

Her voice dropped another notch as she continued. “It’s like I’m back at my old vet clinic or something. You’ve brought them in to see me, and I’m going ‘round in circles trying to keep them from dying. Only it’s me that’s dying, because I can’t figure out what’s wrong with anything, and you refuse to tell me. And then, like he’s been summoned out of thin air by the Devil himself, you know who shows up?”

Before I could say anything, there was a rap at the door. Before I could yell ‘go away!’ or tell Shelly to ignore it, she turned in her chair, grabbed the knob, and twisted it. She jumped to her feet and let out a scared little squeak as the door swung open.

Robert McClatchy stood in the doorway.

His face twisted into an unpleasant smirk. “Don’t get up on my account.”

Flustered beyond anything I’d ever seen from her, Shelly’s voice shook like she was going through puberty all over again. “‘Scuse me. Got work to do. Lots of work down on the slab. In the lab. That’s… that’s where I work, after all.” She threw me a desperate look. “I…I have to go now, Dayna.”

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to sound as calm and reassuring as I could. “Take it easy, Shelly. We’ll talk soon. I’m sure I can help puzzle things out.”

She nodded, and then all but ran down the hallway back to her office. McClatchy watched her go, a mild look of contempt on his face. Unlike Shelly, McClatchy looked like he’d been busy working out, eating right, and getting his beauty rest.

Though he still had a hefty build, he’d lost at least ten pounds of fat from his midsection and upgraded his ill-fitting pinstripe to something dark gray and Italian. As a matter of fact, someone had changed his haircut to a neat 1920’s style high-and-tight. It made him look like a beefier version of Elliot Ness, which certainly didn’t hurt someone who worked in law enforcement.

McClatchy pointedly left the door open and took the seat that Shelly had just vacated.

“Not sure what put a bee in her bonnet,” he remarked, as his eyes

roved over the open manila folder that Shelly had left on my desk. “I suppose it could be what you two were talking about. Your name certainly gets around, doesn’t it?”

My voice went all Ms. Frigid Bitch without any conscious effort.

“What do you want, Bob? I wasn’t planning on inviting you into my workspace anytime soon.”

“I wanted you to be the first to know: I’ve just filed paperwork to run for Chief of Police.” He smiled, and that chilled me more than coming face-to-face with Belladonna’s insanity. “I’ve got to convince the Mayor, the Police Commission, and the City Council to appoint me, but one way or another, the LAPD will eventually see the light.”

“I suppose congratulations are in order somewhere. Don’t let me stop you in your search for that place, because it’s nowhere near here.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” he chided. “I’m actually the best friend you have in either the LAPD or the OME. And it’s a genuine thing, too. I’ve already got my support lined up, so go ahead and support the other guys or gals who decide to run. I know what I’m going to be doing already when it comes to this week.”

“And that is?”

McClatchy scooped up Shelly’s folder. He leafed through the auditor’s paperwork on my questionably contaminated lab results, my probation report, my request for fewer hours, and my inability to identify Connor McCloud. He closed it and turned the folder sideways. In one swift, strong move he tore the entire packet in two and deep-sixed it into the wastebasket at the side of my desk.

“I’m shutting the auditor’s work down and having her review a different subdivision,” he explained. “You’ll get the hours you requested, and no one’s going to ask about your commitments. You’re keeping your job and your field privileges with the OME, no questions asked. I already have enough pull around here to make sure that happens.”

My eyes narrowed. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”

Again with the unnerving smile. “Because of what the voices in my head have been telling me. Because of the visions I’ve been seeing

whenever I close my eyes."

"I don't know what you're talking–"

"Oh, but you do! I know that I have a destiny now, a grander purpose. And you are part of it. Something tells me that you need to be here, to see it all. After all, my gut tells me that you're the one who moved me onto this path in the first place."

The sinking feeling I'd felt when Shelly told me about her dreams were suffocating now. I choked out a reply, trying to stay smart, focused.

"I didn't know you liked me, Bob."

"Like you?" McClatchy got up, went to the door, and looked back over his shoulder as he spoke. "No, I don't 'like' you. All I need you for is to witness my rise to glory. And once I get what I want? I'll pick my own time to burn all that you love to *ashes*."

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Morning again. My stomach went through the usual 'can we get off the carnival ride now?' complaints as I arrived in a white flash at the border of the griffin aerie. Shaw interposed his warm furry body between me and the ground as I stumbled and almost fell.

"Definitely need to talk to Galen about improving this spell," I groused, as I pulled myself upright and shifted my backpack to a more comfortable position. "Maybe I can ask someone at the aerie to deliver a letter by airmail."

"Alas, 'tis a subject that shall have to bide yet," Shaw said, his voice tense. "Something more serious takes place today, and I fear it bodes ill!"

So what else is new in my life? I thought. But I managed to restrict it to my inside voice as Shaw had me mount up. He took off, flying directly towards the aerie like he'd been shot from a cannon. My stomach threatened to evict anything I'd downed in the past hour, so I closed my eyes and focused on breathing before I said anything.

"That doesn't sound good. Where are you taking me?"

"The Lair of the Elders."

My heart decided to join my stomach in an all-you-can-weep pity party at the news.

"Great. What does Belladonna think I've done this time?"

"None but what thou wishes her to believe. She has not requested for thee to appear before the Council of the Elders."

"Who, then?"

"My daughter, Hollyhock."

That made me feel even more apprehensive. Why would Holly call me out in front of the Elders? Then it hit me: she was acting on my last words to her at the Rites of the Autumn Winds.

Cross your talons for luck, I had said. *I should have what I need for us to deal with Thundercrack and the Valkir Pride by then.*

Shaw rounded the very tip of the aerie and banked sharply to land

in a flurry of wing beats. We made our way through the maze of cracks and rills in the mass of stone until we arrived in the semi-underground cavern that made up the Elders' Lair. Six of the council, including Elder Ulrik, waited uncomfortably in silence while Belladonna spoke to the three lance leaders of the Reyka Pride: Ironwood, Blackthorn, and Hollyhock. I tried to read their moods, but they had returned to the statue-stern default griffin expression.

"Eldest," Ironwood announced, as soon as he could get a word in edgewise, "Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels has arrived."

"Eh?" The High Elder's earrings clinked as she raised her head to spot me. "Well met, then. At least one of thy parties has chosen to show their face!"

"Here comes the other," Holly said, motioning with a half-unfurled wing.

Thundercrack's massive frame filled one of the main entrances to the Lair. He was flanked by the last two Elders, who shoved him forward into the chamber. The larger griffin came close to sprawling on the floor. He caught himself, then froze as he spotted Shaw's trio of True Born offspring.

"And so the second of thy parties chooses to arrive," Belladonna observed. The languid composure she had shown during the Autumn Rites was completely gone. Today, she held herself tight, like a venom-tipped spring. "That is good. Those who stretch their necks out are welcome. If needed, the chopping becomes easier."

Next to me, Shaw shifted apprehensively. My unease grew.

Thundercrack looked around. When he found his voice, it was gruff but uncertain.

"I greet thee with respect, High Eldest. Yet, I do not understand why thou hast chosen to summon me into thy presence whilst under guard."

"Pray do not try to flatter me by speaking in the Old Speech," the Eldest said disdainfully. "Thou art a member of the newly hatched generation, one which has forsaken both the Old Speech and Old Way of Names."

Abruptly, I realized what Belladonna was talking about. It was

clear that the later generations of griffins were dropping archaic words like ‘thy’ and ‘thee’ from their speech. But I’d missed the second, equally drastic change. Almost all the older griffins had names that were vaguely Norse or even Viking-like. In contrast, most of the younger ones had names based on nature – such as Blackthorn, Cloudburst, Linden, Thundercrack, or Hollyhock. Perhaps it also explained why Belladonna herself appeared to be younger than many on her own council.

“I am sorry, Eldest. I only seek to serve.”

Belladonna turned away in a huff. Whether that gesture was affected or not, Elder Ulrik stepped up and spoke in her place.

“Thundercrack of the Valkir Pride,” he intoned. “We have summoned you for questioning. We have received reports about your activities that disturb us greatly.”

“Such as?”

“We have heard that you have spoken long and at length against our people’s service to the Andeluvian king.”

“That you called me here for? Old news, Elder one. I doubt that this could disturb even the High Elder’s sleep.”

“We have heard that you have spoken long and at length that our Council should be abolished and filled with new voices.”

The large griffin’s glance flicked fearfully over towards Shaw’s children. “I have said that the young should have more say, more power. That we should open ourselves to new ideas. This is no crime.”

“We have heard that you have spoken long and at length that if we shall not step down, that you will take our place. Over our lifeless and skinned bodies.”

Thundercrack’s eyes went wide. “What am I being accused of?”

“Dayna Chrissie might be able to shed some light on the subject,” Hollyhock stated. She beckoned me to come forward with the wave of a lion paw. “I have spoken to the High Elder and told her that you seek to do more than simply subvert our people.”

I had lots of misgivings, but I had no choice but to speak. Belladonna had, in her twisted way, given Holly a position of trust in watching over me. If I backed out now, then I’d undermine Holly at

the moment she needed me the most, and throw who-knows-how-many knots into my ability to work with the griffins.

"Council, High Elder," I said, stepping forward with a bow. "Aside from looking at your warriors' health, I came here to solve a mystery: which griffin of the Reykajar Aerie could have stolen something from my world. A rare set of crystals, which I fear could be used in Andeluvia for some foul purpose."

Belladonna's eyes narrowed. "And why would such as thee, a purveyor of such evil, seek to expose such to me?"

I caught myself before I rolled my eyes.

"Well," I reasoned, "Someone as evil as I might wish to throw you off my track in some manner, make you think that you had won a victory."

"Too true! Too true! The master might sacrifice the apprentice to throw off the scent of the hunt. Well met, outworlder: I shall take thy bait. Explain yourself!"

"About two weeks ago, a griffin arrived in my world and broke into a museum," I began. "That's a building in which objects of cultural interest are stored and shown to visitors. I recently received proof that the griffin in question had green feathers along his wings. I've seen every warrior in this aerie during my examinations – and there is only one with even a hint of that color in their plumage: Lance Captain Thundercrack of the Valkir Pride."

Immediately, the Elders broke into concerned or excited whispers. Thundercrack bristled and took a few steps towards me, his eyes burning. His voice crackled with rage.

"You would dare dishonor me! Your tricks and schemes have gone too far, outworlder, and I will have no more of it!"

"Stop him!" Hollyhock shouted. "He's going to murder Andeluvia's envoy!"

In a flash, her two siblings leapt into action. Ironwood landed on the Valkir captain's back, sinking his beak deep into the drake's flesh. Blackthorn's forepaws came up to grapple with Thundercrack's. The two wrestled with each other, biting and snapping.

The big Valkir howled with pain, arching his back and throwing

the Reyka captain for a second. Blackthorn seized the moment to pin the larger griffin on his side. He dug his talons up against the drake's throat. Holly darted in and swiped a paw across Thundercrack's neck. She came away with a small object in her clenched fist.

"What is this, Lance Captain?" she demanded. And she held the object up to the light: a shard of perfectly clear crystal as long as my thumb. "Is this part of the magic you used in our pride-spar to stun my warriors?"

Thundercrack's voice was a croak against Blackthorn's deadly grip. "We needed magic to foil your martial art!"

"As I thought. I have listened to your boasts too many times. About how you want all on the Council dead, and that you would stoop to magic to do it! You are a traitor to our kind!"

"Listened to *my* boasts? You call *me* a traitor? *You lie!*"

Thundercrack lunged forward, breaking Blackthorn's hold. He shouldered past Ironwood like a fur-covered freight train. He headed straight for Shaw's daughter. A murderous scream issued from his beak.

The drake's sheer mass bowled Holly over, but she had anticipated this move. She grabbed his talons in hers as they grappled, rolling with his impact onto her back. She pistoned her rear legs against his belly, pushing him up and off, completely flipping the Valkir captain head-over-talons.

Thundercrack landed on one of the cavern's needle-sharp stalagmites. Five feet of razor-edged stone punched through the middle of his back. The impact was followed by a fleshy *slithering* sound as his own weight drove the point deeper. The drake wriggled like a worm impaled on a hook. His screams turned into a fading teakettle whistle as the bloody point erupted from his chest like a monster from horror movie.

Oh, God!

I rushed forward with a cry, heedless of the stares I received from the other griffins. I didn't know what I could do, but I couldn't stand by and see the drake suffer.

I shouldn't have worried.

Though I tried for a solid minute, I never found a heartbeat. Thundercrack had died almost instantly when the stone shard ripped through the muscle tissue of his heart. I sat next to the Lance Captain's body, feeling drained and too shaky to rise. There was a soft sound as someone moved to stand at my side.

High Elder Belladonna looked down at me with an expression of contempt.

"Thou art a fine actress, dark one," she said. "But this sacrifice means little to me. The death of thy minion shall seem peaceful and easy compared to what lies in the future. When thy true aim is revealed to all."

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Chapter Thirty-Four

I couldn't sleep.

I threw back the sheets on my bed, flicked on the bedside lamp, and checked the time. It was the witching hour, if the witches in question had a timepiece that ran a few minutes fast. With a groan, I turned back to looking at the mashed-potato texture of the ceiling.

After what had taken place at the Lair of the Elders, I hadn't felt like remaining at the aerie for the rest of the day. I'd watched as Ulrik called in a lance of warriors from the Korlson Pride to remove the Lance Captain's body, and then to act as liaison between him and the rest of the Valkir. Apparently, no one wanted this to blow up into a full-scale feud between the Reyka and Valkir Prides.

The Korlson griffins had brought along an Andeluvian training weapon called a 'billhook'. The item was simply a sharply curved hook at the end of a long wooden spear. They jammed the hook's point into a space by Thundercrack's shoulder and used it to drag his body off like a freshly slaughtered Brahma bull.

I got up and padded barefoot out to the kitchen for something to eat or drink. As luck would have it, I had a piece of raw liver sitting in the fridge on the shelf below a clear pitcher full of blood-red cranberry juice. I averted my eyes and grabbed a bottle of iced tea instead.

I'd gone to bed early, so I wasn't bleary-eyed. Then again, I'd had that damned dream again. It didn't leap to mind as clearly as the ones before, but I did recall bits of it. Specifically, the part where I spun around in a field of cornflowers like the lead actress out of *The Sound of Music*, only to realize that I'd twirled myself back into the Hall of Gems.

I went to the living room and sank down on the sofa. To be exact, I sank down *into* the sofa. One of the arms was rough and scored, and the springs sagged like a too-large pair of jeans. Both problems were from Shaw lounging on the piece of furniture as if he were a full-

grown lion stopping by for tea on his way to the San Diego Zoo.

The sag meant that I had my knees jacked up a couple inches too high, but it wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, they made an easy resting place for my elbows so I could use my fingers to massage the dull ache behind my temples. The ache fought back with the tenacity of kinked muscle, but I continued anyway.

Yes, I'd solved my case.

But that didn't settle my head, which continued to churn out variations of a dream involving violet gems, blue cornflowers, and a hodgepodge of everything else that threatened to give me heartburn. And the way that the Reykajar Aerie had treated Lance Captain Thundercrack's death had bothered me as well. It felt like everyone was all too eager to close the books. To put a shameful thing behind them. To pin it on a less than popular clan within the aerie system.

A vibration came from the table next to the couch, where I'd set my phone to the 'stun' setting. I managed to scramble and claw my way out of the couch and thumbed the screen before it went dark again. Instead of a phone call, it was a text message – a status update, to be precise – from the genetic testing company I'd hired to handle the buccal swabs.

The first batch of DNA test results were to arrive in three days. That meant I could soon complete the task that made up part of my cover story at the aerie. It was incidental at this point, but I wanted to see if I could do some good for Shaw's people. A quick look through the test results and I could at least identify genetic damage, maybe even a few disease markers.

But as far as Thundercrack's guilt? It just felt too cut and dried for my tastes.

I scrolled through the screens on my phone, wanting to talk to someone about it.

I paused over Shelly's listing. She was a friend, and would at least hear me out. But I scrolled on past her. Shelly didn't really know about Andeluvia. And she was having issues of her own – issues that I was darned sure came from the blowback of a pooka's magic.

I finally got to Esteban's number.

He'd given me permission to call him at any time. Encouraged it, even. And even though he wasn't all that keen on Andeluvia, he did know about it. And he'd met a couple of the magical creature from there.

The throbbing in my head came back with a vengeance.

I gritted my teeth against all the awful thoughts that ran through my mind. *He'll only hang up. He might not even pick up once he sees your number. He hates you, after all. Everyone must hate you at the LAPD with all that you've done. Why would he feel any different?*

Why indeed?

Because he'd been my friend before I'd finally agreed to go out with him. And he had been as patient as possible in trying to cultivate a relationship with me. Especially since I'd given him such rocky soil to start out with.

And the worst he could do was simply hang up on me. I'd probably curl up into a ball on that ridiculously saggy couch of mine when it happened. But I wouldn't be banished from an entire world, flayed and hung up like a ghastly art project, gouged by a battle-mad griffin's claws, or impaled on a sharp piece of rock.

Andeluvia had a way of putting the little things in perspective.

I tapped the key to dial Esteban.

His phone rang once. Twice. Three times. On the fourth ring, I expected it to go into his voicemail, and for the life of me, I didn't know what to say.

A *beep*, and he picked up.

"Dayna," he said, sounding a little out of breath. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I replied, sounding more scared than I wanted to admit. "And no. I…I didn't think you would pick up. Not after midnight."

A pause. "I won't pretend that things are…all that settled between us. But I figured if you called this late, you were in trouble. You know I'd help you if I could."

"Thanks, Alanzo. I really mean it."

A sigh. "So tell me. Are you in any immediate danger?"

"Thankfully, no."

"Good. Wait just a minute, then."

A *clunk* as he put down his phone. I heard him moving around in his room for a bit before he got back on the line.

"Had to finish toweling off and find a clean pair of shorts," he explained. "I got back from a stakeout a little while ago and heard your call just as I got out of the shower. You got lucky. Fifteen minutes either way, and I'd either have been on the road, or catching some Z's."

"Well, I do know I'm lucky. I have a fayleene for a friend," I said, trying to make light of the situation.

Esteban wasn't having it. "And that *hombrecito* was the one who got kidnapped, right? Let's leave luck out of this."

"Okay."

"If you're not in immediate danger, that leaves three possibilities as to why you called me when you ought to be in bed. One: Something's happened between you and McClatchy since he decided to make a run at Police Chief. Two: There's something wrong in Andeluvia again. Or three: You want to talk about us."

I bit my lip when I heard the choices. Technically, he'd hit all three areas correctly. But I didn't want to get into inter-office politics right now. And all I had was my instinct telling me that Robert McClatchy's sanity was eroding away like a sand castle on the beach at high tide.

"Can I pick two of three?" I asked timidly.

"Sure, I'm holding a special today." I heard the creak of springs as he settled back into a chair that sounded in as bad shape as my couch. "Which two?"

"The most important one first. Us."

"I'm listening."

I could hear a smile in his voice that hadn't been there before, and I knew I'd chosen the right answer.

"I was wrong not to tell you about my switching to part time," I blurted, and then caught myself. Forced myself to slow down. "I know that you've been patient with me, and you've deserved an answer as to whether we should pursue a relationship. A real one, I mean. Not like how some people do it these days."

“I know,” he said gently. “Call me old-fashioned, but I don’t want some ‘friendship with benefits’, or whatever people call it these days.”

“Me too. And you deserve to know why I haven’t given you an answer yet. Why I asked for part or even quarter time.”

So I told him, in my clumsy, halting way, how the newly crowned King Fitzwilliam had offered me the job. How I’d waffled on the deal. How it looked like I could have it yanked away if I didn’t solve the latest case.

And then something else came out. My feelings, my honest feelings, about being in Andeluvia. Yes, there were some awful times, some terrible people. But I told him about winning the respect of Angbor, the King of the Centaur Realm. Of being with the fayleene at their Sacred Grove. And of sleeping under the stars of the Reykajar Aerie with a loyal griffin friend resting at your back.

“I wish I could visit like you,” he said quietly, when I finally wound myself down. “And now I feel a lot better.”

“You do?”

“Sure. That’s an awful lot on one side of the scale. And balanced equally against that…is me? I can’t help but be flattered.”

Alanzo couldn’t see me, of course, but I shook my head. I reminded myself to never underestimate the male ego again.

“That said,” he continued, “It sounds like nothing will be settled until your current case ends. How is our grand theft progressing?”

“Depends on how you look at it,” I hedged. “And something tells me that it’s not ‘theft’ anymore. It might be murder.”

A second *creak* echoed down the line as he sat up. I mentally kicked myself for not leading off with this bit: nothing intrigued a Homicide Detective like discussing a new case. I brought him up to speed on the developments at the aerie, my growing suspicion of Thundercrack, and the video evidence that led to his exposure and subsequent death. It took a while to cover everything, especially with Esteban’s questions injected into my narrative, but like any good investigator, he followed along without much difficulty.

I listened to Esteban’s breathing as he sorted out the jumble of facts I’d just conveyed. I found that I was holding my breath, waiting

for his answer.

"You may be right," he said flatly. "Any way you slice this, it looks fishy. What was it, exactly, that moved the Elders to convict this 'Thunder-crack'?"

"Well, it was my evidence. The film clip that I got from Hector."

"But you never showed it, did you?"

"No, I didn't. They don't have that kind of equipment in Andeluvia. One of the Elders noted how Thundercrack was known as something of a political troublemaker. When they revealed that he was planning on seizing power by force, he became hostile. I presented my evidence, and he completely lost it. He would have killed me if Hollyhock hadn't stopped him."

A pause. "Dayna, this is important. Think back. Immediately after you presented your evidence, what happened? Be as exact as possible."

I walked through it in my head again. My memory wasn't photographic, but it was pretty darned close, and I'd drilled it over the years on the job to stay sharp.

"Thundercrack took two…no, three steps towards me. He said, 'You would dishonor me! Your tricks have gone too far, outworlder, and I will have no more of it!' And that's when Hollyhock shouted to stop him, that he was going to murder me."

"How far away was this griffin when he said what he did?"

I closed my eyes. "Maybe twenty, thirty yards."

"Close enough to kill you before someone intervened?"

"No, absolutely not. There were more than a dozen other griffins in the chamber. Shaw himself was at my side."

"So, this Thunder-guy thought he could fight all of them? And then beat one of the toughest griffin warriors in Andeluvia? Only because he didn't like what you were saying about him."

"Well…griffins can act on impulse. And he did mean to kill me."

"Did he? Because I didn't hear a threat anywhere to do you bodily harm."

I blinked. "I'll be damned," I whispered. "All he said was 'I will have no more of it'. He could have meant 'I don't want to hear you

talking anymore' as well as 'I will kill you so you'll stop talking'."

"Would a griffin be so…I don't know, *subtle* in their threats?"

I shook my head. "No, they wouldn't. They'd probably be pretty graphic about how they were going to kill you, to boot. Hollyhock must have been expecting Thundercrack to become violent…and she overreacted, worried that he would try and kill me."

"Maybe. It still seems off to me, somehow. How sure are you that this case is closed at all? I don't mean the possible murder here. I mean, did you nail the perpetrator of the museum heist?"

"Pretty darned sure. Holly took one of the missing crystals off of Thundercrack, for starters. Then there's the security camera footage with the green-tinged feathers."

"Any chance I can see it?"

"Sure, if you have a computer on your end."

"Matter of fact, I've got my computer booted up and in front of me."

"Sounds good."

Phone in hand, I went back over to my kitchen table where I had my own laptop charging up. I flipped open the lid, plugged in the storage drive, and sent the video clip to Esteban via email. In less than a minute he had the clip downloaded and playing.

Over the phone line, the sounds of Tomás' panic, the griffin screech, and the breaking glass were laughably tinny. But I heard Esteban's puzzled voice at the end of the video's playback. A pause, and he played the clip again. And again.

"That's odd," he murmured.

"What?"

"I don't see that green plumage you were talking about."

That got my attention.

"Maybe your monitor needs adjusting."

"Maybe, but it's pretty new. Have you seen the tape on your own laptop yet?"

"No, but I can fix that."

I selected a media program to play Hector's clip. Again, the burglary's sequence of events played out. Tomás appeared and then

started screaming as the glass broke. An answering griffin call. A blur of feathery wings appeared on the camera footage.

An icy chill ran down my arms.

I replayed the file, watching it more carefully. Then again, freezing it at the right point.

The green I'd seen on the mystery griffin's wing feathers was completely gone.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

I sat behind my desk, using every ounce of my willpower to keep from looking at the clock or grabbing the office phone. I read through the same damned office memo three times trying to force what it said into my brain. It was maddening work.

At the end of our phone call last night, Esteban had given me one piece of advice: *Check and re-check all your facts. You might find that some of them are actually assumptions in hiding.*

Exhibit Number One in the catalog of 'what I thought I knew' was that video footage.

So, after another four or five hours of restless sleep, I came in to work early and visited the digital lab. Hector wasn't there, but one of his co-workers said that he usually showed up around nine in the morning.

I went back to my office and tried to whittle down one of the desk's paper piles, all while trying to keep a straying eye from the clock.

I called Hector at 8:59. Then at 9:04. Then at 9:10.

My hand crept up to the receiver at 9:17 when the phone's ring made me jerk forward as if I'd been zapped with a jolt of electricity. I scrabbled with the receiver even as the first ring faded out. I didn't even look at the extension shown on the phone's display.

"Dayna Chrissie!" I exclaimed.

A friendly laugh on the other end. "Whoa, now. I heard that you were a live wire today, and they weren't kidding. You need to cut back on that caffeinated sludge you call coffee."

"Hector," I sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just…there's something different about the footage you sent me. Different than when we saw it in the lab, I mean. Did you do anything to the tape?"

"Hm? Oh, that. I had to clean the footage up a little to make the freeze-frame clearer. Also, I color-corrected it. Had to do the same with my photos as well."

I felt something terrible looming in my mind, coming in like a swell at night. It took everything I had to hold it together as I spoke.

"Color correct? I don't understand…why?"

"Remember that odd lighting in the Hall of Gems? They're all old sodium-arc lamps. They look cool but they throw the color off things by a full shade."

"Can…can you send me a copy of the original, un-altered footage?" I swallowed, hard. "It's really urgent. I need to compare it against…"

That same weird feeling surged up inside my head, making me feel faint.

"Okay, I'll send it right now. You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just tired. Please send it, I'll be at my desk waiting for it."

I managed to get the phone to its cradle right as the awful feeling hit full force, right along with one of my head's odd *clicks*.

Images and understanding now, in a flash.

Everything had been right in front of me the entire time.

And I had missed it!

The name of the million-dollar traveling exhibit from the Hall of Gems formed in my head: *The Montana Cornflower Sapphires.*

The fields of cornflowers that kept showing up in my dreams? They were just as they looked like in real life. Bright blue.

The little faceted gems that kept showing up in my dreams? They were just as I had seen the Montana sapphires when they were wheeled out of the Hall of Gems. Bright purple.

No one in their right mind would call a set of gems the color of Concord grapes a 'cornflower' exhibit.

Hector had even said, *I had to switch to some different lenses and start over…the lights here are playing havoc with my photos.*

It took everything I had to not break down and cry.

Stupid, stupid!

I'd made mistakes before. I knew that they were a fact of life. No one was perfect.

But this mistake had led to the Elders accusing an innocent griffin

of wrongdoing.

This mistake had led to someone's death.

And if I wasn't the only one responsible, then I sure as hell played a key role.

Twenty minutes later, one of Hector's assistants came to drop off the additional copy of the footage. He found me at my desk, hands over my face, trying to hold my emotions together. I felt brittle, as if I'd been cast as a spun glass figurine.

He looked at me as if I were losing my mind. I suppose he wasn't far off.

"You okay? Sure you don't want me to get you some aspirin?"

"No, thanks. I just had…you know, a little tension strain. Had to rest my eyes for a moment."

I waved him out of my office, copied over the file labeled Unaltered_MoNH_Data, and sat back to watch the footage with a different goal in mind. To see if I could spot facts, now that my assumptions were gone.

The first time through, I saw the green color on the feathers again.

The next time through, I froze the image and saw something new.

Hector had seen a pattern on the screen, which he assumed were the outlined ridges of individual feathers. But griffin feathers pressed tightly together in smooth folds. I knew that they had to, in order to hold in warmth. Like with waterfowl in my own world, it helped wick moisture away from the skin with a thick, plush barrier.

I took a bunch of screen shots from separate frames of the film and printed them out. I was sure of it now: the green color, which only came out under that oddball lighting, was actually a natural pattern. And I'd bet a month's pay that each pattern would be as unique as a fingerprint.

It took a couple more viewings to realize that I'd had another assumption sitting in my way. An assumption I had to discard if I was going to make any progress on this case.

At the critical moment, the blur of green-patterned feathers blocked the security camera. It was close, within four or five feet of the lens.

The metallic keening sound came at the exact same time.

That was the vault door being ripped off its hinges and dumped on the floor.

The vault was at least sixty yards away, across the vast open expanse of the room. So that could lead to only one conclusion.

There was more than one griffin involved.

Yet as soon as I realized that, I wanted to push the idea out of my head. Shaw, Ulrik, and everyone else agreed that dishonorable, thieving griffins could exist. Had existed in the past. However, if the Skinned Ones were any guide, the villainous griffin conviction rate still hovered at under a half-dozen over the past few *centuries*.

So not only would you have to find a lone, dishonorable griffin.

You'd have to find a second one, just as willing to be dishonorable, to help out. And one that was loyal enough to keep quiet about the entire deal. To keep honor among thieves. The odds of that happening among the griffins I'd been with over the past few days seemed so vanishingly small that it was ludicrous.

And yet my mind kept circling back to the question of motive.

Who came out ahead in all of this?

Who benefited from Lance Captain Thundercrack's death?

* * *

I felt a sprinkle of rain across my face as I arrived in Andeluvia the following morning. Shaw steadied me, and then lifted a wing to shield me from the droplets. It was a nice gesture, though not really necessary; the rain was little more than a drizzle.

"Bide but a minute, and this squall shall pass," Shaw assured me. "I am glad to see thee on this day. It was a trying time on thy last visit."

"That's one way to put it," I agreed. "I'm not used to justice being carried out so swiftly. Nor am I sure that it was justice."

"Thou hast misgivings about the guilt of the Valkir captain?"

I nodded. "Afraid so. I've got some new evidence that shows he wasn't the griffin that robbed the museum. I don't know who the culprit is yet, but Thundercrack might have been goaded into being someone's stalking horse."

A griffin frown greeted that expression. “What manner of horse does this ‘stalking’?”

“It’s just an expression, one that comes from hunting. It’s from a time when human hunters would hide behind a horse or an obstacle that wouldn’t spook their target.”

“Thus distracting their prey from the real threat,” Shaw muttered. “Aye, the events of the other day seemed too easily tied into a neat bow. Who dost thou suspect?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I hedged. “Let me think on it for the moment.”

“Art thou in danger from the true guilty party?”

“That depends on their ultimate goal. If all they wanted was to throw me off the track, then Thundercrack’s death should be the end of it.”

“Agreed. We must act forthrightly, as if the case has been closed.”

“However, if the goal was something else…I think that whoever is behind this is going to feel that they can move more boldly. That they can take some more risks.”

“Then I remain worried for thee.” The sun broke from behind the clouds, so he lowered his wing. “The rain has passed. Alight, for we have an appointment to keep.”

I slipped into the damp saddle, wincing as the cold water soaked into the crotch and inner thighs of my jeans. Hopefully it would dry out soon, or I’d be looking at some serious chafing. Shaw took off in a spray of droplets and we quickly moved to soar over the treetops.

“An appointment?” I asked. “With whom? I’m not going to get any of the DNA tests back until tomorrow at the very least.”

“Hollyhock asked for thy presence and company for the morn. She has kept thee safe and conveyed thee in comfort before, so I saw no grounds to object.” Shaw paused, and then added, “Yet I have new misgivings, in light of what thou hast told me.”

“You may be right,” I said grimly.

Part of me still resisted the idea that Holly could have anything to do with my suspicions. And yet…she had done the most to implicate the dead Lance Captain. Did I dare share her company anymore?

“Mayhap I can dissuade her?” Shaw asked tentatively.

I considered it, and then rejected the idea out of hand.

"No. All I have are suspicions. Holly could be innocent of any wrongdoing, and all I would do is drive a bigger wedge between the two of you."

A low chirrup. "I thank thee for that, Dayna. Unlike her brothers, Hollyhock at least remains open to my presence. I would like to retain that, if thou deems it possible."

That touched me. I knew all too well what it was like to be emotionally separated from members of one's family. "I think you should keep making the effort, then. Holly won't forgive the Council for their decision about the Way of the Serpent, but she did appreciate your compliment about their martial art."

We came in for a landing along the pathway by Holly's open-roofed apartment. Being human, I couldn't help but spot Holly's head above the stone dividers. However, I kept resolutely quiet as Shaw knocked and announced our presence.

Holly's voice came from beyond the wall. "Come in, please!"

In response, Shaw simply clambered over the wall. I held tight to the saddle as his body lurched back and forth, but we were over in a couple of seconds. I dismounted and stood on an unevenly humped gray sand and gravel floor. Holly rubbed cheeks with Shaw and bowed to me.

"Welcome, father. And welcome, Dayna," she said cheerfully. "Unless I miss my guess, this must be the first real griffin dwelling you have visited."

"You've got that right," I said, looking around with interest.

At first glance, there didn't seem to be much to the place. The bare rectangle of floor was simply framed by matching sets of the same tumbled, chest-high walls on every side.

"As thou canst see," Shaw put in, "We griffins are not much for furniture."

"Oh, I think I spot at least one piece that looks familiar," I said, pointing out a section in the wall. Instead of tumbled rocks, two horizontal marble slabs had been laid or mortared into place, making a pair of sturdy shelves. "I don't recognize what's on display there, but

it looks interesting."

Interesting was something of an understatement. Holly had a half-dozen glistening metal cones the size of a large spear point on each shelf. Some of the cones had a silver or golden sheens, while others looked well-worn and purely functional.

Shaw looked at the collection curiously. "Wouldst these be gear made for…practitioners of the Way of the Serpent?"

Holly's expression remained neutral, but her body stiffened. "They are, father. The Council may have judged me, but they said nothing about my keeping–"

"Be at ease," Shaw reassured her. "As I have said, I admire thy craft for what it is. I shall not divulge to the Council what is not directly asked of me."

"You…won't?"

Shaw made a fatherly sigh. "What did I tell thee upon thy first-ever flight?"

Holly fluffed her feathers in good humor. "That I should not worry about getting hurt. That I should look to the sky. Because you would be there and do what must be done."

I couldn't help but smile. "You make quite the dad, Grimshaw."

"'Twas a good thing, too. My daughter fledgling nearly crashed on her first flight from the nest. I had to catch her in mid-plunge." He cleared his throat, returning to the matter at hand. "That said, as a warrior, I wish to know more about these spear points for thy tails."

Holly launched into an explanation about how she had contracted with various smiths in Kescar Port for the weapons. I didn't want to intrude on the conversation, so I took a stroll around Holly's apartment. Aside from the shelving, the remaining walls appeared to be the same in color and construction.

Griffins didn't seem to have much need for more than one room, but I suppose that it made sense. They hunted instead of preparing food, so there was no need for a kitchen. They didn't wear clothes, so there went the need for closet space. Entertainment was performed in outside spaces or midair, so a living room wasn't needed. The ocean was close enough for showers. And of course, everyone utilized the

Brownway as the publically designated space for bodily excretions, meaning that both plumbing and toilets were superfluous.

What Holly used for her bedding still escaped me. Given the sandy floor, her apartment did, in all honesty, look like a well-kept cat litter box. I noticed that it felt similar to the beach used at the Rites of the Autumn Winds. A griffin could easily scoop out or piled up whatever comfortable shape they desired. In that sense, it could serve as a combination shag carpet and memory-foam mattress.

But Shaw and several other griffins had spoken of 'nesting'. In fact, I'd even seen such nests, both on my initial flight to the aerie and at the eggery for the True Born chicks. Maybe Holly just curled up wherever she wanted, or reclined on one of the mounded parts. Curious, I kicked at one of the humped-up areas of sand in the far corner of her room.

The *crackle* of brittle wood came from the pile. I nudged aside some more gravel and sand with the toe of my shoe to reveal a set of jagged sticks, some still with dried leaves attached. These branches looked different than the ones that made up the nests, though. Instead of being shaped and curved to form the rim of a gentle oval, these had been bent until they snapped.

I knelt, running my fingers over the uneven, sharp breaks and thought a moment. Then I moved to my hand to the wall and found the corner covered in scrapes. The scrapes matched the diameter of the branches and were stained with dried sap.

My mind flashed to one of the first forensic exhibits I'd ever worked on. A section of wall panel from an apartment where a domestic argument had escalated to murder. The impact of a person's head on the panel of sheetrock had been outlined in a splash of clotted blood.

These scrapes on hard stone told me something energetic had happened here. Something violent. These branches hadn't been broken by someone idly playing with the wood, or stepping on it. They'd been smashed to kindling.

And then Holly had covered up the evidence.

Why? What *else* was buried here?

I scooped away another handful or two of sand from the base of the wall.

Then I flinched as my fingers encountered something.

Something that was both sharp-edged and tacky to the touch.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

I flipped over a small stone the size of a drink coaster.

A jumble of colored specks gleamed back at me.

I didn't know what I was looking at, but a chill ran down my spine all the same. I cast a hurried glance over my shoulder. Holly and Shaw remained deep in conversation. They were still focused on the contents of her display shelves, so their backs were to me.

Swallowing hard, I decided that I had to act before either of them turned around.

I reached down and cradled the stone in the palm of my hand. The specks had been smeared or plastered across the rock in two rough groupings. One group was made up of flecks the shade of ripe persimmons, while the other group's specks were black with creamy white dots. In fact, the entire backside of the rock was shiny with a coating of some mystery substance. Whatever it was had dried while remaining slightly sticky to the touch, like improperly applied varnish.

More out of instinct than anything else, I grabbed the stone along with a wad of the broken-up twigs and jammed the entire thing into my jacket pocket. Then I scuffed the sand back over the tangle of branches with my shoes. Another moment to smooth things out, hiding the fact that I'd been poking around.

I wandered back over to stand between Holly and Shaw. I felt the weight of the stone in my pocket, and thought about how many regulations I'd be breaking if I were in Los Angeles right now. It couldn't be helped. There were answers here, I just knew it.

A gentle rapping came from the outside wall.

"Thou hast more visitors?" Shaw asked, surprised.

Holly shook her head. "None planned." She raised her voice as she added, "Whomever knocks, you may enter as a friend."

A young reeve fluttered over the low wall. She had more brown than gold in her fur, and she sported a flatness to the feathers around her head that made it look like she'd gotten a close cropping with a

pair of electric clippers. To my surprise, I recognized her as one of Shaw's kids.

"Hello, Linden," I said, as soon as Holly and Shaw had given their greetings. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon. How was your first patrol?"

"The wind was with me," Linden replied brightly. "In fact, with my first patrols under my wing, Lance Captain Halifrid promoted me to courier duty for the week."

That got a smile out of me. It was easy to get caught up in the kid's enthusiasm, though I suspect that it was just a promotion from 'general lackey' to 'mail room duty'. That said, you had to start somewhere.

"What message do you bring for me?" Holly asked.

"I must ask your pardon," Linden replied, adding a clumsy bow as an afterthought. "I bring none for you. It is the drake Grimshaw that I seek."

"Thou hast searched for me?" Shaw looked puzzled. "Who sends me a message on this day?"

"The Council of Elders. They wish to confer with you upon a most urgent matter."

"This is getting to be a regular occurrence," Shaw grumped. "Dayna, I must leave you in Hollyhock's care again."

"It is no burden," Holly put in. "I did ask for Dayna's company 'till the noon hour."

"Then I shall return to thee then. Where shall I find the two of you?"

"The Reyka training grounds."

Shaw grunted agreement. He turned toward Linden, but not before catching my eye. I made a tiny nod, encouraging him, and he spread his wings. "Let us be off, Linden."

A dual beat of wings, and the two were aloft and heading further upslope towards the Council's chambers.

Upslope. Mentally, I groaned as I contemplated climbing the mountain again.

Holly must have read my expression, for she quickly turned her

flank towards me. “Nay, Dayna. In the interests of using the morn to its fullest, I shall fly you to the training grounds.”

Gratefully, I climbed on board her muscular back. “Believe me, I appreciate it. But why are we heading there?”

A low-throated chuckle. “Oh, my brothers and I have something special in mind for you.”

Yeah, that made me feel a *lot* better, given my worries.

Aloud, I said: “Can’t wait.”

It was a short flight. Holly took off almost vertically this time, and I got a good view of the winding trails up the northern flank of the griffins’ home. Far below I spotted the amphitheater-shaped beach that I’d bested Thundercrack on, as well as the eggery for the True Born.

Now, I wondered what life awaited the four chicks that were to be hatched there.

We landed at the Reyka training ground, next to where I’d done my first swab tests. Holly directed me towards one of the hollows in the rock, one that had been turned into a sparring arena. Blackthorn and Ironwood lounged on one of the rough stone benches along the side. They looked up as we approached.

“You did bring her,” Ironwood observed.

Blackthorn let out a snort. “Didn’t think you were serious.”

“She needs training, brother. We won our last first-blood match more by luck than anything else, if the truth be known.”

The massive drake bristled a little at that, but he kept quiet. Ironwood handed Holly the club I’d used at the pride-spar between the Reyka and the Valkir. She in turn gave it to me with a little bow. I took it with a feeling of unease.

“I don’t understand,” I said warily.

“Among griffins,” she explained, “You may recall that one of the biggest honors is to join a particular art’s Martial School.”

“Well, you had told me that I’m too weak to join a school. And I still can’t fly, last I checked.”

“Second only to joining a school is the opportunity to train with an art’s leading practitioner.” Holly made a slight bow to me. “I would

be honored to be your instructor for the time you have remaining here at the aerie."

Despite my misgivings, I was touched. I bowed back as best I could. "I think I'm the honored one here. I suppose that we're going to learn more work with the club?"

"Yes. Let's move to the sparring area. I'll try and impart what wisdom I have."

We spent some time with her suggesting different ways for me to hold my club, and some battle stances. In truth, it was more than a little 'let's just try X and see if it works'. Holly was obviously an experienced instructor, but a human grip was a lot different than a griffin's. And battle stances worked quite differently for bipeds than quadrupeds.

Next, she drilled me in a series of easily understandable moves. I ended up using the club more like a short staff, learning how to block and parry blows as well as deliver them. By the end of the session, I did feel slightly more capable. Holly then lined up a series of wooden targets and had me smash them. By the second set, I'd lost some of my inhibitions and let the targets have it with a will. By the third, my palms were beginning to chafe and my arms stung with the force of the repeated impacts.

"Time out," I called, and I set the club down for a moment. I flexed my wrists to loosen them and shake out the tension, and then went to my pack for a sip of water.

"You are lucky you are not a griffin," Ironwood remarked from off to the side, startling me. I'd thought that he had gone to sleep. "Breaking a practice session? That is grounds for punishment."

"Pay him no mind, Dayna," Holly called. "Ironwood, do not be ungenerous."

"That's all right," I reassured her. "I know this is just a taste of what you spend your entire adult lives doing. Being warriors, I mean. I just don't see how this will help me. How can learning one skill, especially imperfectly, help me if I'm ever in danger?"

Holly considered. "In truth, it may not. But there is always a possibility."

“Oddmarr,” Blackthorn murmured, as he stretched out along the bench as if to nap.

His sister nodded agreement.

“Yes, Oddmarr! Part of his saga may help you understand.” She continued as soon as I had taken a swig from my canteen and returned to the sparring area. “My brother refers to one of our oldest stories. The griffin warrior Oddmarr, after many exciting adventures along the Shores of the Sorrowful Sea, felt his bones finally grow weary with age. But to his amazement, there along the shore one day was the shape of a griffin, one whose body was smoke, bound together by sunbeams. He knew at a glance that it was death itself, the embodiment of all he had cheated and diced against during all his battles. Death called to Oddmarr to join her where she reclined upon the warm sand.”

I had to interrupt at this point. “Death is a reeve, a female griffin?”

“Well, in the old stories, she always was. Should you meet her, perhaps she will show a different form and gender to you, as a human.”

“No doubt. Sorry, go on with your story. This is getting interesting.”

“Oddmarr lay on the beach across from Death, understandably wary. Death explained that she was somewhat annoyed at the fact that Oddmarr had kept on evading her talons, and that she wanted to settle things once and for all. She challenged him to a game – one where if she won, Oddmarr would let Death take him right there, and return him to the Eternal Sky. If Oddmarr won, then he would ascend into the night sky and become the greatest of all griffins, honored in star and song.”

“I take it that Oddmarr took up the challenge.”

“Actually,” Ironwood put in, “Death made it clear that he didn’t have any choice but to play the game.”

“Death can be like that in these kinds of stories, I’ve noticed.”

“As it happened,” Holly went on, “Death surprised Oddmarr by creating a square board set atop a grand table of crystal. The board

was made up of black and white squares, each of which contained an object that could only move in certain ways."

I couldn't help but interrupt again. "Wait, wait. Are you talking about 'chess'?"

"The very game. But at this time, in the distant past, only the human kingdoms played it. Poor Oddmarr had never even seen this game, and he couldn't keep all the strange rules straight in his head. Very soon, he realized that he was badly outmatched, and Death began wiping his pieces off the board. And that is when he did the thing which he is immortalized for."

"He won the game?"

"In a manner of speaking. Oddmarr unsheathed his talons, and with a mighty blow, he shattered the crystal table and broke the board to pieces!"

"How did that…"

"How did it help? Oddmarr was a canny drake, and one who knew how to listen. Death had told him what would happen if he won, and what would happen if he lost. She never said what would happen if the game never finished." Holly's eyes smiled as she added, "Legend has it that all of Death's head-feathers fell out from the shock!"

"What happened to Oddmarr?"

"He could not ascend to the heavens, nor be taken by death. So he remains even now, wandering the Shores of the Sorrowful Sea, immortal and ever questing after adventure. Which was all Oddmarr ever wanted."

A sniff from Blackthorn, who sat up and let out a sigh.

"I just love happy endings," he said, completely sincere. "They make me cry."

"The point is," Holly concluded, jabbing a talon in my direction, "Sometimes the best option you have is to pull the unexpected out of nowhere. Let's say that you know to use a club when your opponent thinks that all you can use to defend yourself is a Dragon-Hand gun."

I finally understood. "That's a major advantage. Just because no one expects it."

"Good. Because now we're going to spar."

So we did. I mostly stayed on defense, using the moves that Holly taught me, while she circled about like a big jungle cat and took swipes at me from every angle. I quickly lost my inhibition against hitting Shaw's daughter as I realized how badly I was overmatched. None of my blows connected, no matter how hard I tried.

Amazingly enough, I found that I was enjoying myself. Holly disarmed me a couple of times, though most often I would find her beak pressed against my leg or her talons jutting an inch away from my abdomen. Ironwood would call out 'strike!', and we'd return to our positions.

Sweat dripped from my brow, but I didn't brush it away as I tracked Holly's movements. Her tail twitched excitedly, and I knew that her blood was up as well. She performed the same strike pattern I'd seen twice before: a swipe from the left, then at my head from the right. I ducked, and with more luck than anything else I scored a hit on her forearm. She jumped back, more startled than anything else.

"Maybe I'm starting to get the hang of this," I panted. "You better watch yourself!"

"Maybe you are!" Holly replied, sounding pleased. "Let's find out."

In two lightning-quick moves, Holly batted the club from my hand and swept me off my feet with a swipe of her tail. I landed on my back with the wind knocked out of me. I gasped as Holly unfurled her wings and made a short aerial hop, then pinned me with a talon set fully upon my chest. She brought a hind leg up and rested it on my belly, flexing the claws there. I felt pinpricks through my clothes. One flex of her hamstring, and she would completely disembowel me from rib cage to pubic bone.

"I have you pinned, Dayna. Just where I want you!" she exulted. Given how her paw was compressing my rib cage, I didn't have the breath to answer.

A strange, joyful look came into her eyes. She bent her razor-sharp beak towards my face, and I opened my mouth to scream. No air, no sound came out.

Holly nipped me hard, between my head and my right shoulder.

She repeated it with a second nip on the left. Only then did she back off and let me get up. I coughed and gasped as I got to my feet and forced air back into my lungs.

Blackthorn and Ironwood sat at attention, an unreadable expression on their eagle faces. They traded a glance and then looked curiously at their sister.

"That was…unexpected," Blackthorn said.

"Who knew that your winds blew in *that* direction?" Ironwood remarked.

"Go pass a clutch of eggs, the both of you!" Holly shot back. She turned to me, sounding apologetic. "I am sorry if I scared you, Dayna. You were in no danger from me just then."

"Uh, thanks," I said, as I rubbed one of the spots where Holly had bitten me. It throbbed painfully, enough to let me know that I'd have one hell of a bruise there the following morning. "What did you…why did you do that?"

Holly glared at her siblings as she answered. "It was a mark of friendship, that's all. I forgot how…tender humans can be."

Blackthorn looked up into the sky and nudged his brother. They both scowled.

"Our sire approaches," Ironwood stated. "I shall take my leave."

"Not alone, brother," Blackthorn gritted.

Holly shook her head as the two took off. "Dayna, this was great fun. Perhaps we can do it again? I may be able to find a private sparring ground for us next time."

"Sure, I think I'd be up for it," I said, though a twinge ran down my collarbone from one of her nips. She really had bitten me hard. "You don't want to stay to speak with Grimshaw?"

"I wouldn't object. But my brothers need me."

With that, she unfurled her wings and followed her siblings' flight path.

A few moments later, Shaw glided in to land. He had one fist clenched, and he looked troubled.

"I take it that the True Born kept thee well enough?" he asked.

"Pretty well," I hedged. "Holly wanted to stay, but the drakes

don’t want to talk with you.”

“Mayhap I can repair the bond another time. I need to share with thee what the Council has said. Dark spells surround a certain object. The High Elder has charged me with finding the truth of this matter at all cost.”

Shaw opened his fist to reveal the crystal that Holly had taken off Lance Captain Thundercrack.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

I took the crystal shard from Shaw and held it up to the light. It was so clear as to be almost completely transparent, and I could see no crack or internal flaw along its entire length. I was no gemologist, and I'd never seen the entire 'phantom quartz' exhibit that had been stolen from the Natural History Museum. But this looked to my untrained eye like a quartz crystal – one which had no inclusions or faults of any kind.

"The Elders cannot find a specific use for this stone," Shaw informed me. "Yet one of the Council members determined this crystal hath been subjected to portal magic. And that is not all." His voice dropped as he added. "The portal magic used…was cast from inside the aerie itself. It does not match the pattern of a centaur's spell work. So they know thou art innocent – but not who is guilty."

I considered. "This is serious. We better go talk to Galen."

"Aye, I thought as much."

I gathered up my pack and placed the crystal inside one of the small utility pockets, then secured the griffin club as best I could. I stuck the heavy end down into the backpack's main compartment and zipped it closed. Eighteen inches of the handle jutted out and rapped me on the back of my head as I climbed up into the saddle. I gritted my teeth then grasped my silver medallion in my fingers.

One flash-and-bang later, we arrived on the wide stone balcony just outside of Galen's study. Shaw swooned as if he were going to fall, so I scrambled out of the saddle before my leg got pinned. However, once free of my weight, the big griffin steadied himself well enough.

Galen threw open the glass doors at the far end of the balcony and came trotting out to meet us. He looked happy, though his face was smeared with smoke or grease and he wore a pair of heavy work gloves. I could still make out the sleeves of his burgundy colored jacket, but the rest was hidden under a stained gray smock.

“My companions-in-arms have returned!” he said joyfully, as we all traded greetings with each other. “I gather that you have made your sudden appearance in order to divulge the solution to the griffin mystery?”

I rubbed the back of my head where the club’s handle had bonked me yet again during the rough transit. “Ah…not quite. We may have more questions than answers. One of these brought us back to you.”

“My intellect is completely at your disposal, as always,” he said, motioning us to follow.

The clip-clops of Galen’s hooves echoed on the stone balcony but quickly muffled as we trod on the carpet that lined his combination study and laboratory. He led us past an object that took up an entire table top. The Wizard had discreetly thrown a heavy blanket over the item.

He pushed through a second set of doors to reveal an antechamber lit by a quartet of small porthole windows. The midafternoon sun illuminated the room’s contents: a smaller oval table and chair set, shelves filled with multicolored liquids in trapezoidal glass bottles, and a blackboard covered in chalk diagrams and math equations.

“That item under the blanket…part of the King’s special project, I guess?” I asked.

“Precisely. However, I may not divulge anything of its nature, so please refrain from asking.” Galen reached behind his blackboard, located a bell pull that ran up to a hole in the high ceiling, and gave it a yank. One of Fitzwilliam’s pages appeared almost before the bell’s peal faded away.

“Bring us comestibles and refreshment,” Galen instructed, in his familiar professorial tone, “Do so in sufficient quantity to fill the bellies of a famished centaur, woman, and griffin warrior. Enlist the aid of the kitchen help to bring it forth.”

The page, dressed nattily in the standard light blue uniform, bowed and went off at a run.

“Truly, thy magic is matched by thy wisdom,” Shaw said approvingly.

“And my hearing, perchance. It is early for dinner, late for lunch.

But your belly was rumbling loud enough to alert any prey you might have decided to hunt on the way here."

"That might have been my own belly," I added. "I've been busy sparring all morning. Shaw was stuck in a Council meeting for the same amount of time, and neither of us stopped for a meal before coming here."

"Indeed." Galen set his smock aside on a nearby hook and selected a spot for us at the table as we waited for the food and drink to arrive. "I sense a tale that underlies all of this."

Shaw and I began filling him in on all that had happened at the aerie since we had last seen him. Galen's expression wavered from general interest to outright concern. But he did not evince true emotion until I told him about allegations of magic brought up against Lance Captain Thundercrack.

"The white flash you observed during the pride-spar could have been a spell of confounding, analogous to the Staff of Stunning used by Master Seer Zenos," Galen mused. "But that is minor magic, certainly nothing on a par with the kind needed to open a portal."

"Could this help determine what kind of magic is at work?" I handed him the thumb-sized crystal Shaw had given me.

Galen grasped the crystal between thumb and forefinger, bringing it close to one eye for detailed examination. Then he held the piece up to one of the windows to allow light to pass through it. It glowed like a brand fresh from the fire as he moved his free hand slowly back and forth behind it to see how the image distorted. Next, he pressed the crystal in between two of the wooden boards that made up the table top, making sure that it stuck out upright. Finally, the Wizard grabbed a two-tined Andeluvian fork from its nesting place on a heavy cloth napkin and gave the shard a quick tap.

A delicate chime rang out from the stone as if from one of the little silver bells used to call for hotel staff or to let a waiter know that a dish was ready for pickup. Shaw's already stern brow furrowed even more, and Galen let out a noncommittal *hmmm*.

I was on tenterhooks waiting for his conclusions, when suddenly the page and a pair of serving boys arrived, carrying platters of food

and drink. Galen plucked the crystal from where he'd jammed it and stuck it into one of the many pockets in his wizardly cloth jacket without further comment.

One of the servers laid out a full suckling pig, complete with a roast apple stuck in its snout, right in front of Shaw. The griffin drooled, but managed to restrain himself from snapping his first bite until the young man had moved his hands away from the platter. Another server placed a brace of game hens set in tureens swimming with root vegetables, pearls of barley, and a savory-smelling brown gravy on the side of the table closer to me and Galen. Finally, the page set out plates, extra napkins, pitchers of the Andeluvian sweet white wine called 'summer table crush', and a platter piled high with fragrant purplish-black baked figs drizzled with honey.

All conversation ground to an immediate halt as Shaw and I paused to stuff our faces. Galen politely nibbled at one of the roast hen's legs and a scoop of the figs while we did so. This was classic Andeluvian banquet fare, hearty and heavy on the meat and grains. If by chance I did end up working more with Fitzwilliam's court, I'd definitely have to start watching my weight more carefully again.

"Thou art dining well," Shaw remarked as he began crunching his way through the bony skull of the pig with his sharp beak. "'Twas brought promptly, too. Is it always as such here in thy demesnes?"

A shrug in reply. "The king feels that the less time I spend foraging for sustenance, the more I shall spend on his projects."

"Nice to know that he takes care of his subjects," I noted.

"Doubtless he is generous to all those who can aid him in the retention of what he desires. Now, as to that crystal: it carries no magic itself. Nor has it been utilized in any spell craft."

"Really? Because the Elders believe that it has been subjected to a portal spell."

"Indeed it has, in the sense that it has been teleported multiple times, to multiple locations. Likely your world, when it was removed from the museum, and elsewhere within Andeluvia. However, it was not used to facilitate the spell itself."

"All right. But if these crystals weren't used for opening portals,

what use are they? Obviously, someone went to a lot of trouble here."

"You speak truth." Galen rubbed his chin in thought, one of his unconscious mannerisms I found so charming about him. "One thing I noticed, from the way this crystal reacts positively to light and vibration, is how pure the structure is. I would therefore deduce that it could be used in the process of amplification."

"Amplification? Of what?"

The Wizard spread his hands. "Light, heat, vibration, sound, or even magic itself. It's why crystals are ensconced within many magic artifacts, for example."

"Using a magic booster to help power a teleportation spell would be a good reason to grab a set of these crystals. But since they were able to open a portal to my world to get these in the first place…"

"Absconding with them would be superfluous," Galen agreed. "Perhaps they are meant to amplify light, or heat, in a way detrimental to griffins. It is possible that they could be used to detonate a package of the incredibly powerful explosives your world possesses."

I thought about that as I dabbed my lips with a napkin to wipe away the trace of honey that dripped from one of the figs I'd eaten.

"Maybe. But the powerful stuff you're talking about, like military-grade C4, is kept under a lot more security. And I think law enforcement would have been informed if such a theft took place."

Galen was quiet for a moment as he fished the crystal shard out of his pocket and held it up a second time. He ran his dexterous fingers over the surface, peering at the piece even more closely. His brow creased as he spoke again.

"Mayhap this is a minor point…but did Lance Captain Thundercrack use a harness, or bear a saddle with pockets when he arrived at the Lair of the Elders?"

I thought back. "No, he didn't. Thundercrack never wore anything, not even armor."

"Then how did he bear this crystal into the Council sanctum? I see no hole at its base to hang it on a cord or chain. If he carried it in paw or mouth, surely the Council would have seen it and forbid him

entry."

"He didn't have much choice as to his time of entry, but I see what you mean." I turned to Shaw, who sat close-beaked in his spot after finishing his meal. "You're awfully quiet all of a sudden, my friend. What are you thinking?"

Shaw's expression was crestfallen. "I am thinking that thou art avoiding an obvious conclusion. If the drake in question could not have brought the crystal in by himself, then it was placed upon him by the one who found it."

"Hollyhock." The name came out of my mouth in a croak.

"Dost thou not think she must have some share of the guilt? Thou need not spare my feelings in the matter any further."

"I have my suspicions," I said, hating myself as I said it. "But I haven't found any motive for her to do any of this. Obviously, she and her brothers aren't pleased with the Council, nor were they fans of Thundercrack. But was that enough to create a situation where someone would be killed?"

Galen broke into our conversation. "Dayna, do you bear a wound of some sort? You appear to be bleeding."

Startled, I touched my shirt near my left shoulder. It felt damp. I quickly shucked my jacket and blouse. I still retained a little prudishness about being nude around my male friends, no matter that they went without clothes all the time. But they had seen me in bra and panties before and made no big deal of it.

A small red blotch stained the cloth up by the shoulder. But the Wizard was more interested in the matching abrasions between my neck and shoulders. I bore a pair of V-shaped bruises, complete with dots of blood where the skin had been torn.

Shaw remained stock-still, staring at the marks.

"It's nothing," I said, embarrassed. "Holly gave me those when our sparring got a little heated. She said they were 'marks of friendship' or something."

"Interesting," Galen observed. "From my understanding, these kinds of bites denote only one thing in griffin culture: the commencement of the courtship and mating ritual."

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Okay, I thought. *So maybe Shaw's daughter has a crush on me. I'm got to put that aside for later. That's got no relevance to the case in front of me. I need more answers, and I'm not going to find them in Andeluvia right now.*

After receiving the cultural bombshell about the twin bruises Holly gave me, I had Galen put Shaw up at Fitzwilliam's palace until I returned. Then he recharged my medallion and sent me back home in a flash-bang of ozone and white light.

The first thing I did on my return was get the fleck-spattered stone and branch clippings out of my pocket and onto the work desk in my study. Since I still had custody of the OME van, I went out to the garage to fetch my forensic equipment and do a little detective work on my own.

Using a tool kit from one of the crime-scene cases, I managed to scrape off what I was interested in. I went after some of the gluey residue that coated one whole side of the stone, and then followed it up with both persimmon-colored and speckled black flecks. I put each bit onto an individual acrylic glass plate and swung my gooseneck desk lamp over to take a good, long look at them.

I'd send all the samples in for genetic analysis to be sure, but it was obvious to me what I was looking at: dried egg yolk and flecks of egg shell.

Heart beating fast in my chest, I went back over the rock again. I didn't find any other color groups on the surface of the stone. And it was likely that I was looking at two separate color groups. The persimmon and the black-and-white speckled shells were distinct, and I didn't see any evidence of shading between one set and another. I began packaging up the samples, adding selected pieces of leaf and bark from the smashed branch segments.

My mind was awhirl with possibilities. Just as with the 'friendly' nips Holly had given me, I was starting to look at a lot of her

behavior, and even more of what she'd said to me in a new light.

What about her quick mood changes? Holly seemed to be a happy griffin overall. But she'd also shown pensiveness, absent-mindedness, and quick flashes of anger. For the most part, these emotional swings had happened at critical moments. When she'd shown me where the True Born were being hatched, for one. And during the mating rituals of the Autumn Rites.

Flashes of our heart-to-heart talk that night kept coming to mind.

Is unapproved egg laying a source of shame in your world?

Have you ever offered counsel for someone who did something for love?

Something that others might find questionable?

Dammit, what the hell was I looking at here?

I leaned back to think. The chair let out a piteous creak to remind me I needed to oil it, but I ignored that for the minute. I had other problems. And a problem was what Holly had asked me, in a roundabout way, to solve – or at least listen to.

I couldn't see Holly smashing her own eggs. That would take a degree of sociopathy that I just didn't sense in her. But *someone* must have done this, and destroyed her nest in the bargain.

What if that someone was Thundercrack?

That would provide the motive I was looking for. Motive enough to frame him and engineer the situation to allow her brothers to kill him in front of the Council, with no one the wiser.

The problem was, that explanation didn't quite cover all of the bases. Griffins treated those half-walled houses as complete units, true. But those eggs and the branches that made up the nest were utterly destroyed. It would have taken some time, and made a lot of noise. Had Holly been present, she'd have screamed bloody murder and attacked. If she'd been out? I still couldn't see the griffins turning a blind eye to someone violating another's private sanctuary and…

Wait.

Set aside the 'who' and the 'what'.

There was one more 'why' to throw into the mix.

Whether Holly was present for the destruction of her offspring and

nest or not, *why didn't she remove the debris?* Holly had scooped sand over the remains, but she still slept there. The human equivalent would be like someone coming home to find that a burglar had smashed up their bedframe and left a pair of corpses atop the mess. And the response? Simply throw a blanket over everything and continue slumbering there like nothing had happened.

I knew that griffins weren't overly sentimental about death. I'd seen a couple first-hand examples of that.

But that behavior was a stretch, to put it mildly.

Neither did it explain a damned thing about the theft of the crystals from the Natural History Museum.

I grabbed the packaged samples and just managed to beat the L.A. rush-hour traffic into the far reaches of the San Gabriel Valley. My destination was the genetics lab I'd been mailing all my samples to. Then I sweet-talked the lab supervisor into adding these items to the 'rush' order I'd put in.

The freeway had transmogrified into the rush-hour parking lot, so I got to play my part as a single snowflake in a glacier as it crawled along towards my exit. The rank smell of oil on the freeway crawled up my nose, shimmed in heat mirages off the hot asphalt. I closed my eyes and smelled the clean-tasting air of the sea, felt the movement of air pushed by a griffin's wings.

Someone honked at me. That got me moving into the six feet of space that had opened up ahead of my front bumper, which was enough to satisfy my frustrated fellow motorist.

It was past sunset by the time I finally got back to my neighborhood. I wasted another twenty minutes at a drive-thru Chinese place to pick up a late dinner. At home, I dug into a carton of unidentifiable pan-seared meat and veggies I lumped under the category of 'chicken scary-yaki' and did my best to plow through the grease with a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks.

Finally, with a full belly to quiet a fuller mind, I went to bed. For the first time in a while, I wondered what I would dream about. But at least I knew that I wasn't going to be having any more dreams about blue flowers and purple crystals.

* * *

I ended up at my desk in the OME building a full thirty-five minutes early.

I went to see Shelly, not sure of what I was going to say, but a scrawled note on her door informed me that she was out sick again. I got back to my office and tried calling her home number, but all I got was her voicemail. She'd recorded a new message, where her tired-sounding voice assured everyone that she was fine, and that she'd be in by Friday.

I left her a message telling her that despite the note on her door, I was worried as heck, and that she needed to call me pronto. Then I had to put all of that aside and focus as best I could on paperwork until the results of my first buccal swab tests arrived. Of course, I'd thought that trying to get work done while waiting for Hector to come in was hard.

That was nothing compared to now.

I re-read the same damned office memo again, trying desperately to concentrate. I didn't even want to think about how I was going to study for the firearms certification test. My mind kept running through the same things over and over: Holly taking the crystal off Thundercrack, Holly telling me the griffin fable about Oddmarr, Holly sparring with me, Holly holding me under her body and nipping me with her beak.

A rap on my doorframe.

I looked up to see a courier in a red and yellow uniform. He searched for a clear landing spot on my desk. Failing to find one, he smiled and then placed a fattish softpack envelope on the visitor's chair.

"This package contains medical data," he said, almost apologetically. "Since it's considered sensitive information, I need to get a signature from you before I can leave."

I nodded, thanked him, and signed the electronic pad he held out. No sooner had the young man left my office than I pounced on the envelope like a griffin grasping her prey. I tore back the opening strip and shook out both a storage device and a pile of color printouts.

The top sheet was a formal letter of apology from the company. Apparently, my samples had been contaminated, so it couldn't stand by any of the results for legal or medical purposes. That said, the letter noted with some astonishment that the contamination of both avian and feline elements in the samples was remarkably consistent.

Yeah, no kidding, I thought, as I copied over the test results from the storage device onto my own computer. Then I dragged the copied information into a folder where I could use a program to work over the raw data. Software was simply better than poor human eyes in sifting through interminable genetic code sequences, looking for markers to identify both unique species and individuals within that subgroup.

The tech department had just upgraded my machine to something less than a decade out of date. That was a good thing, too, since it took several minutes for my computer to grind its way through the mountain of G-T-A-Cs that made up the four components of all DNA segments.

Finally, the sifting was complete, and the dozens of samples I'd taken showed eighty-nine unique genetic markers that showed up across all samples. Forty were coded as avian, while the remainder were categorized as feline DNA sequences. I'm sure that a real geneticist would have had a field day with this information – not to mention a possible nervous breakdown – but I was able to save the sets of markers as the 'griffin species' profile.

Next, I wanted to select two individual griffins to compare and contrast. I picked Grimshaw and Elder Ulrik. They were the same gender, and from a similar age group. But if the program could distinguish them adequately, then it was highly likely that I'd be able to single out a particular griffin's DNA when the time came.

I ran the program a second time.

All the species markers showed up, as well as twenty more unique differences between the two males, showing without a doubt that they were two genetically distinct individuals. I almost did a little fist-pump in the air, I was so elated.

"Okay," I said aloud. "Now that we're ready for prime time, let's

find out who burgled the Hall of Gems."

I brought up the information that had been inputted by Shelly's boys in the lab downstairs. This was the DNA test done on that feather found at the Natural History Museum. My fingers quivered as I typed in the commands to compare the test against the griffin species outline.

The result popped up on my screen.

SPECIES PROFILE: MATCH

If there was any doubt in my mind that the feather had come from an Andeluvian griffin, it was gone now. I changed the settings to compare the data from individual griffins next. Then I ran the feather's genetic sequence against Elder Ulrik's profile, since I had his information up already. Again, my screen flashed immediately.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

Just as expected. I clicked on the sample I'd taken from Lance Captain Thundercrack next.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

I'd known this result was coming, but it still hurt to see it on the screen. Like an electronic finger damning me for my mistakes.

I decided to click on Shaw's information a second time.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

I searched for Lance Captain Ironwood's entry and entered it.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

His brother Blackthorn came up next. I held my breath as I selected the file.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

My forehead immediately began to perspire.

"If neither of you drakes are my quarry, then it must be your little sister," I said under my breath. Hands shaking, I fed Holly's information into the program.

SAMPLE: NO MATCH

Air whistled out of my lungs.

I had been so sure, *so sure!*

One by one, I ran through each of the profiles. Every single one of the griffins was a match for the species, and no match for the

individual sample. Not only did the feather not belong to any of Shaw's offspring, it didn't belong to anyone from the Reykajar Aerie at all.

I'd been on dead-end investigations before. I knew what it was like to be knocked all the way back to square one.

This was different.

I'd just been knocked back to square *none*.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

I rested my elbows on an ice-cold iron railing, watching a sixty-pound lead bob swing back and forth on its wire tether. The viewing area next to the Hall of Gems was quiet, as the Natural History Museum was almost deserted mid-week after 4pm. That was fine by me, as I found the tick-tock motion of the museum's Foucault pendulum strangely comforting.

Perhaps it was because the pendulum's motion was dictated in purely scientific terms. The rotation of the Earth, the adherence to Newton's Laws. It was neat, tidy. It was only when people got involved, and in the fantasy world of Andeluvia, that the rules seemed to get thrown out the window.

Things got messy.

Things got broken.

People got killed.

No matter if they were human or griffin, I found that I couldn't distinguish between the deaths of one versus the other. I hadn't liked Lance Captain Thundercrack the few times I'd met him, yet in a strange way, I owed him. I'd played an unwitting part in his destruction, and that hurt me. Badly.

I wanted whoever had set him up exposed to the world. I wanted them to face justice.

When I'd sat in front of my computer, slack-jawed with astonishment that none of my swabs had matched the feather sample, a voice popped into my head. Specifically, the voice of Professor Gerber, my instructor in Trace and Impression Evidence. The man was so ridiculously Swiss that he wore an alpine fedora to class, complete with a little cuckoo feather jutting out of the side. He was also so brilliant that I never met anyone who made fun of it.

Gerber's one dictum, which he hammered home on every lesson, was "When in doubt, *wieder von vorn anfangen* – go back to the source! Only then will the scales shall fall from your eyes!"

So I went.

I walked through the Hall of Gems, noting that the skylight's entire frame had been emptied of glass. The opening had been replaced with a wooden cover held fast by steel bracing. In fact, the temporary repairs helped plunge the hall into the same type of pre-dawn gloom as before. Those same sodium-arc lights cast their subtle color changes all over the place; I held out my hand and now saw that my pale skin had taken on an ever-so-slight orange tint.

I paced three circuits around the place, and nothing new jumped out at me. The makeshift vault was still there, and a new mineral exhibit put in its place. The wrecked door had been hauled away and probably sold for scrap.

No matter how I cudgeled my brain, I didn't get any random flashes of brilliance. I reached into a pocket and drew out a folded sheet of paper, the printout I'd made from a still shot of the security camera footage.

I wandered over to stand underneath the camera that had filmed the events that had driven me to this unique point in my life. The vault looked smaller from this vantage point. The shadowy form by the vault had been huge even for your average griffin.

A chime sounded, followed by a cultured-sounding recording from an overhead speaker.

"Attention, all patrons," it said, "The museum is due to close in fifteen minutes. Please return to the lobby."

My thoughts were decidedly gloomy as I made my way towards the exit. Even if, by some miracle, I did unveil treachery to the griffins…would they believe me? I couldn't keep up the farce I had going with Belladonna much longer. What if she wanted me flayed? Could the Council refuse? I wasn't sure if there was any sort of 'checks and balances' on a griffin ruler who was a full sandwich short of a picnic.

Then again, the positive outcome of the scenario wasn't much better. If I accused any griffin – or pair of griffins – and everyone believed me, what would happen? The accused would be sure to fight to the death. It would be suicide for me to be there without backup.

Would my friends come? Shaw had to be there, of course. But Galen had his king's project to work on. Liam the Protector sounded like he was busy training his replacements. Smart thing, too. The mad fayleene prince Wyeth was still out there and fayleene society was as restless as the griffin one, with unruly stags and back-biting does to keep in line. I knew that for a fact, ever since…

I stopped and leaned again the wall for a moment. I cradled my head in my hands as the biggest *click* I'd ever felt in my life came together in my mind.

Of course.

Just like before, the solution was right in front of me all along.

It wouldn't work without the three people I trusted more than anything else in the entire world. Both worlds, actually. The ones I thought of as my family, now.

I tried to keep the hope that surged inside of my chest in check. I needed to get back to the office and gather a couple of things. Then home. And before midnight, I could be back in Andeluvia to see if any of the crazy plan I had in mind would work.

The Long Beach freeway was snarled by a couple of accidents, so I took a winding route through the city streets, moving only marginally faster along the clogged avenues. The OME lot was emptying out by the time I arrived, so I parked close to the building and got back to my office as quickly as possible.

I made a fresh copy of the printout from the museum footage, and then began searching through the debris of my office for a protective folder to keep it in. Stashed under the bottom drawer of my desk was an open-top bin filled with presentation materials. A quick paw through the messy contents turned up everything for a slideshow I'd done for the Academy of Forensic Sciences.

I found the folder I wanted, as well as a number of other items I'd used to good effect during my own presentation or while listening to others.

On impulse, I grabbed one I thought might be important and stuck it in my pocket.

I heard someone clear their throat from over by the office door.

Cautiously, I peeked over the lowest of the paper piles.

It was the same red and yellow uniformed courier from the shipping company. He smiled again and handed me his electronic pad.

"Running late today," he apologized. "Wreck on the freeway, a lot of people are caught in it. I figured…well, you looked like the kind of person that would be here after hours."

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not, but I let that go.

"Yeah, sometimes that happens," I sighed, as I signed the pad.

He tipped his cap to me as he left. My heart skipped a beat as I spotted the cardboard shipping envelope he'd left for me in the visitor's chair.

These were the results from the samples of Holly's eggs, yolk, and nest!

I came halfway around my desk and reached across the mountains of paper to snag the slim package. My hip jostled the desk, causing the stack of color printouts that had come with the last batch of griffin test results to tumble to the floor. I let out a curse under my breath as I fished for the printouts with one hand and retrieved a mixed-up bundle of paper.

I set the envelope down next to my office chair and riffed through the randomly shuffled report. The pages were a summary of the DNA segments in line upon line of G-T-A-Cs. It was a pain to read. That was the main reason I'd ignored these and simply fed the electronic version of the information into the computer. Worse, the idiot who had printed these out had made the page numbers small enough to look like little ink smears.

Grumbling, I found the top page. That was the letter apologizing for the strangely consistent contamination of avian and feline genetic markers. I quickly sorted through the papers, skimming down the page to find the information I wanted.

Holly's name crossed my field of vision along with a lengthy string of letters identifying a sample portion of her genetic code. It was practically a blur that slid by my eyes.

Until I saw it again.

I thought for a moment I was imagining it, but I'd trained myself

to spot patterns from Day One on the job. I paused and flipped a few pages back. The listing was Ironwood's. That made sense. Since he was her brother, his code would look very similar to hers. As a matter of fact…

I held up the paper with Ironwood's entry right next to Holly's.

Ironwood's genetic code wasn't similar to his sister's.

It was one-hundred-percent *identical*.

I scrabbled to find the page with Blackthorn's information. Sure enough, it was a perfect match to Holly's as well.

And I hadn't seen it, because I'd never compared the siblings' DNA. I'd only compared each of them against the feather found at the museum.

But the only way you got a complete match of this sort was with an identical twin. Holly had made it clear that her mother had given birth three times over a period of several years between births. That ruled out identical twin or triplet births. And True Born or not, I doubted that the griffins practiced cloning. So, I was looking at an impossibility. I'd collected each of these samples with my own hands, and nothing could have gotten so badly contaminated that I'd get these insane results.

Suddenly, my mind flared with memory.

I *hadn't* collected all the samples with my own hands. I'd let Holly collect the ones from her brothers during the Rite of the Autumn Winds. She'd been gone for a while – I'd even commented on it. She'd had plenty of time to swab her own cheek twice more.

Holly must have purposely faked the test results.

Holly must have planted the crystal on Lance Captain Thundercrack.

But had she stolen the crystals from the museum in my world?

I rubbed my temples, trying to stave off a headache. I didn't want to know anymore, I didn't want to convict her, even mentally.

A voice inside of me cried, *But why not?*

"Because I don't want to hurt Grimshaw," I said to myself. "Because I don't want him at odds, separated from any of his True Born offspring."

The voice scolded me. *Stop it! Stop pretending that you're doing everyone else a favor and admit the truth! Why not?*

"Because she's my friend," I whispered "As for what Holly feels…I think she wants to be even more than a friend with me. But friends don't do this to each other."

So you let 'friends' murder people in cold blood?

"I don't know if it was in cold blood! Dammit, I don't know why she'd do such a thing at all! And if she had no motive, I can't…"

My gaze slid down to the side of my chair, where the last report from the genetics lab sat inside its cardboard slip, as venomous in its own way as a pit viper. I didn't want to open it. I was afraid of what I might find.

But I forced my hands to move. I had to know. Whatever I felt for Holly, I had to know what was driving her forward into realms that I hoped to never see.

I tore open the envelope and read the results.

Swallowing hard, I plunked my butt back into the office chair, fired up the computer, and began comparing the DNA sequences.

"Son of a *bitch*," I choked out.

It all made sense now.

So why wouldn't my hands stop shaking?

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Chapter Forty

Grimshaw paced back and forth across the floor of Galen's laboratory. His expression looked unconcerned as I outlined my plan, but I knew better. His tail flicked back and forth, and the lion's tuft at the end bristled like that of fearful tabby cat.

"Thou hast given me some difficult tasks," he grumbled. "Certainly, the Council will convene the pride leaders and leading griffins to the Lair of the Elders shouldst I press the issue. But to ask to use magic in order to transport directly into the Reykajar Aerie? 'Tis a request they will balk at!"

"Then we don't request it," I said bluntly. "We demand it."

The old griffin simply stared at me.

"I believe I comprehend what Dayna is attempting," Galen put in, as he folded up his gray smock and straightened his wine-colored jacket. "True, no one may utilize a spell to enter the griffin aerie without leave of the Elders. However, that law stems from a treaty with the Kingdom of Andeluvia. Since Dayna is officially an envoy of Andeluvia, she can demand the use of such a spell as a matter of state diplomacy – say, as a negotiation summit between two equal kingdoms."

"Yeah, what he said," I agreed, pointing at Galen. "And if that doesn't work, you can tell Belladonna that my dark plans to somehow ruin the Reykajar Aerie is about to come to completion. Surely she'd want to be there for that, to prove to the Elders that she is right and they wrong about her visions."

Shaw's beak twitched a couple of times, as if he were chewing the ideas over in his head.

"Ever have I trusted thee," my griffin friend sighed. "Though I sense that little good will come from it, I shall convey thy words."

"Thank you." I relaxed a bit, but I suspected that Shaw would turn out to be all too correct. "Once the griffins have gathered, send a courier to await our arrival at the border. We'll send him or her back

with a message that we will arrive at the Lair within the hour."

Shaw's great golden eyes blinked in amazement. "I do not understand thy intention. Why ask – nay, 'demand' permission for transporting thyself into the heart of the Council's demesne, and then not do so?"

"I am puzzled as well," Galen put in. "It does seem to make Shaw's request superfluous."

I put my hand out to touch the Wizard's arm. "I'll explain what we're doing once Grimshaw leaves." Shaw looked a little hurt at my words, so I quickly added, "I'm sorry, my friend, but I can't lay out all of my cards on the table just yet. I don't want to put you into a position where you have to evade the Elders questions if they ask what I'm up to. Believe me, we really need the element of surprise here."

"Thou senses that there will be combat?" Shaw sounded halfway hopeful.

"There might be. Given how our luck runs, I think we should be ready."

I opened my jacket to reveal my gun, safely tucked into its shoulder holster. I hadn't had my certification test yet, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let that dissuade me. Almost unconsciously, Shaw in turn reached a paw up to tug on one of his chest plate straps.

"Perhaps I had better employ precautions as well," Galen agreed. He picked out a long iron staff capped with brass at the base and topped with the sculpture of a dragon's claw. The claw, which had been finely crafted to show the details on the talons, gripped a sinister looking green gem. "I discovered this in one of Fitzwilliam's storage cellars recently, and it suits my purposes within reason."

"Thy staff looks deadly, Wizard," Shaw growled approvingly. "Dost it shoot fire? Lightning?"

"Given our recent battles, I have decided to learn a little from Dayna and employ some subterfuge." Galen nodded at me, and I felt more than a little flattered. "You have observed me casting both fire and energy without the use of a staff, correct?"

"Aye, that I have. But if so, what magical use is your weapon?"

“Magically? Absolutely nothing. But I can use it to bash in a recalcitrant foe’s skull if needed. And it shall serve as a distraction. Given its intimidating looks, many foes will attempt to destroy the staff without realizing that it is harmless. That shall give me the time needed to cast my own enchantments.”

“Very slick,” I said, as I tried to keep a grin off my face.

Galen gave me a confused look. “What does your use of the term for low viscosity have to do with my stratagem?”

“Never mind,” I sighed. “Can we transport Shaw to the border of the griffin lands now?”

“Fear not!” Shaw said, regaining some of his old bravado. “I shall have my people where thou wishes and gain the favors thou seekest.”

“I never doubted you for a second,” I said, meaning it.

Galen stretched forth his strong centaur arms and concentrated. “*Asha théann tú!*”

A flash-bang of white, and Shaw vanished.

“That’s two down, and one to go,” I said, half to myself. Galen looked at me inquisitively, so I added, “Just talking out loud. For this plan to come off, I needed help from each of my three best friends in this world. I’ve been worried that one of you would say ‘no’, which would leave me up a certain fetid creek without a paddle.”

“I am not sure which creek you refer to,” Galen reassured me. “Nor, perhaps, do I wish to know. But you underestimate what bonds of friendship mean between the peoples of this world. Especially when they have been forged between such wildly disparate groups. Rest your mind: we shall all play the parts you deem necessary.”

I had to tamp down the swell of emotions inside my chest. “Thanks, Galen. I forget sometimes. I expect the worst, what with my rotten luck and all, and that’s not always the case.”

“Sometimes expecting the worst, or at least preparing for it, is a prudent course of action. It also helps one avoid disappointment.”

I let out a rueful laugh. “Too true. Galen, do you have enough power left for some sustained spell casting? I mean, can you transport someone in from elsewhere, and still leave enough magical energy to go into battle?”

“I have sufficient, but not excessive power.” The centaur maneuvered his large chestnut-colored equine body to reach a high cabinet in the corner of the room. He retrieved a familiar-looking gold medallion. “I will make use of a pre-existing enchantment. This amulet carries a transport spell that brings the wearer to me upon my summoning.”

“That sounds like how you brought me here.”

“The spell resides in the same family of enchantments. It will allow me to make maximum use of the power I do have.” Galen motioned menacingly with his faux wizard’s staff. “To that point…you do feel that there is a high likelihood of physical or magical conflict?”

“Unfortunately, yes. At least once we get to the Lair of the Elders.”

“Then I must inquire further: Who do you believe that we shall have to fight?”

I looked away for a moment. I’d been worried about the reaction of the griffins. But that was small change. I was much more worried about the safety of my friends. I had to keep things quiet before Shaw left. But I would do Galen no favors by playing coy about what might happen when I started pulling out all the stops.

“I’m not sure who we’ll have to fight,” I said. “Possibly everyone.”

Galen looked at me as if I’d grown an extra head. “Might I ask you to define ‘everyone’?”

“I mean, every griffin that arrives in the Lair. Maybe just the Valkir Pride. Maybe just the Reyka Pride. Maybe both. Maybe the entire Council of the Elders.”

The Wizard swallowed, hard.

“You are not making some strange jest? You are utterly serious?”

“That’s just the worst of the worst-case scenarios,” I admitted. “I just don’t know how everyone will react to what I plan to show regarding that break-in.”

“Your intellect is truly dizzying, Dayna. Yet I remain mystified. Do you believe that all the members of one pride concocted the theft? Or, perhaps, that all nine members of the griffin Council of Elders broke into this ‘museum’ of yours?”

“No, I can’t. But I *can* prove that the nine members of the Council

were all at one very specific place at the same time. And I think that is where the journey towards the museum theft really began."

Galen's eyes went wide as I explained.

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Chapter Forty-One

The Lair of the Elders had looked appropriately cavernous the first time I'd entered. Now, it was filled with griffins who sat, stood, or paced expectantly. A couple let out small squawks of surprise as they spotted my Wizard companion. In truth, Galen did cut a fine figure in his burgundy and silver jacket, shaggy mane of dark hair, and the intimidating-looking dragon-claw staff.

We'd taken a couple of hours to make our way along the steep slopes of the hills and valleys which led from the border crossing to the aerie proper. It was long, and even when Galen gave me a lift part of the way, I felt the strain in my legs. But I didn't want to just teleport on in. I wanted time for the word of our coming to spread.

I wanted as many griffins in the Lair as would fit. Partly to show the truth to as many as possible. And partly because with enough griffins, whoever considered settling things by combat would think twice. Any fight that broke out in such a small space would be swamped by the sheer number of bodies.

The room was drowsy-warm from the body heat of all the griffins. Their combined animal musk lay heavy on my nose, as did the tang of salt, as I heard the muffled roar of the surf as it beat along the many hidden passages below.

Above, the afternoon sun slanted in through the stone skylight. It cast the multitude of side passages and crevasses on the sides of the cavern in stark relief. And it shone through the network of iron chains, which cast a grim net of shadows over the faces of the Council as they sat perched on the boulders waiting for our approach.

I spotted Shaw off to one side, and he nodded brusquely in our direction. Somehow, he'd managed to swap out the leather riding saddle he'd been wearing for the last several days. Instead, he'd replaced it with an additional set of articulated armor plates that covered both his spine and his belly. Though his wings remained free, the additional weight probably made it impossible to fly. Then again,

flying wasn't really an option with a roof of iron chains suspended just overhead.

The crowd of griffins contained several members of the Valkir Pride, a couple Korlson griffins I recognized from the practice pride-spar, and the three True Born of the Reyka Pride. Holly, Blackthorn, and Ironwood all sat looking on with carefully fixed neutral expressions. To my surprise, the three weren't sitting together. Instead, they'd posted themselves at almost equal intervals around the circuit of the vast room.

I couldn't waste time to speculate why. The High Elder Belladonna perched atop the highest rock mount in the room, glaring down at me. Her head hung in a low, predatory position as I approached. Given her posture and her unkempt plumage, she looked like a vulture awaiting a meal of carrion to arrive.

Belladonna spread her wings in one smooth motion as she raised her forepaw, exposing needle-sharp talons. Suddenly, the cavern grew pin-drop quiet.

"Thou hast returned, Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels," she declared, in her solemn screech of a voice. "I am informed that thy plans are about to reach fruition! But I have foreseen thy downfall, and such evil plans as yours shall surely fail. I only wish to be present upon such an occasion."

I heard a choked cough from one side, a titter on the other. Many griffins still weren't taking the Eldest's rants all that seriously. I had a suspicion that their attitudes might change in a hurry.

"I have indeed returned, Eldest," I said, as I took a few steps forward to speak in front of her and the assembled crowd. "Yet my plans were never set against the griffins. I've been blessed to stay among you for several days now. You are a proud, noble, and strong people."

A couple of pleased murmurs rose from behind me. Everyone liked praise, and my reputation from the contest involving Thundercrack and the resulting pride-spar probably scored me a few extra points. Thankfully, no one seemed to be cursing or blaming me for the death of the Valkir Pride's Lance Captain.

Belladonna looked confused. Her wandering eye joggled back and forth as she spoke. “But…thou hast admitted to me that thy magic brushes were never meant to help my warriors! And thy plans did involve the sacrifice of thy pawn, Thundercrack of the Valkir!”

Some angry muttering boiled up behind me. I bit my tongue against replying quickly; griffins respected strength. Instead, I forced myself to take a deep breath.

Without looking back, I held up my right hand.

The griffins around me went quiet. Only then did I speak.

“My ‘brush magic’, as you call it, was meant to find out who was worthy. Both of serving with Andeluvia’s Air Cavalry…and also of my trust. Because there is treachery in great supply here at the Reykajar Aerie. That treachery is what killed the Lance Captain of the Valkir, not I!”

“Liar!” Belladonna spat. “There is no dishonor, no treachery in my demesne unless thou hast brought it here in thine own black heart!”

Good, I thought. *At least Belladonna is being predictable in her outrage. And I just got the opening I wanted.*

“If you believe that there is no dishonor in your demesne, then will you allow me to bring someone here to prove that very thing?”

“Thy lackey has already told us of your demands,” she snarled. “For the treaty we share with the nation of Andeluvia, I shall permit it, envoy. But beware! This request tries my patience, and thy king shall hear of it! So tell me, miscreant: who could one such as thee bring to judge the honor of my people?”

I smiled.

“How about a fayleene? Specifically, the Protector of the Forest?”

A burst of both disbelieving and excited whispers broke out amongst the assembled griffins. Even Belladonna looked a little shocked. I nodded to Galen, who murmured a magic phrase under his breath.

A *snap-BANG*, and in a flash of white, our friend Liam stood at my side before the Elders.

Gasps of wonder came from all around us. Once assuming the role of the Protector, Liam’s maturation had accelerated, turning him from

a bedraggled, fawnlike buck into a handsome young stag. His body was still on the small side, but his shoulders had widened with new cords of dun-colored muscle. Even his mismatched eyes simply called more attention to his refined deer face and symmetrical ten-point rack of antlers.

Liam had a jeweled cloth barding across his back, similar to the one he'd worn when he'd been first anointed as the new Protector. Back then, the barding had been bright green and studded with emeralds. Now, the fayleene's ornamentation was bright red, orange, and black. The cloth he wore fairly dripped with blood-red rubies, orange sunstones, and polished cabochons of onyx. He was easily the brightest object in the entire cavern, and the griffins closest to him drew back as if in fear.

"Be at peace, High Eldest," Liam stated, in the firm voice of a young ruler. "I am Liam of the Fayleene, the Protector of the Forest."

"I greet thee, mighty fayleene," Belladonna said, awestruck. She made a slight bow, which sent a jangly rattle through her piled-on beads and bangles. "You honor us with thy presence."

"It is fitting, for I have been called here on a matter of honor." Liam tilted his head towards me for a moment, then took a step forward as he spoke. "I am a being of the fey. We sense evil the way a griffin smells blood and smoke on the wind. I tell you now that Dayna Chrissie is a creature of the Good and the Light. It shames me to think that she would lack the friendship and trust of all who encounter her."

Belladonna leaned back on her haunches as Liam stepped towards her.

"But…great Protector, she claimed to be serving the Dark Ones I have seen in mine own dreams."

"A ruse. Wise Belladonna, your dreams contain shades of the truth. There are forces moving that seek to harm those who count as Creatures of the Light. But they have you jumping at shadows when the real threats sit out there in front of you. As a creature of honor, will you allow me to help Dayna reveal the truth?"

The High Elder simply bowed and spread her wings. *Go on,* her gesture seemed to say.

Liam's voice rang out across the cavern as he spoke. "Nigh on twelve days ago, two or more griffins somehow transported themselves to the other world. The world of Dayna Chrissie's people. There, they broke into a dwelling known as a 'museum' and stole a set of magically potent crystals. Dayna was charged by both her people and the Andeluvian King to find the culprits."

I risked a look around. The griffins sat quietly, eyes rapt upon the fayleene ruler. So far, so good. Liam was sticking to the script we worked out. Not only was this getting the griffins to listen, it was slowly slipping me off the hook with Belladonna. But my fingers were tightly crossed for the next part.

"The magic contained within Dayna's brushes will not only tell who is physically capable of serving King Fitzwilliam," Liam went on. He began to slowly walk a circuit around the inner part of the cavern, looking at each griffin in turn, making sure that he could be heard. "They also speak to a griffin's bloodline. A single drop of blood, a single strand of fur, a single feather – any and all things can tell Dayna if a griffin has been present when a crime has taken place."

Liam had completed a third of his circuit. I snuck in a glance at Holly and saw nothing but a mask of fear and impending rage on her face.

But we were set on this path now. I had to see it through.

"Yet this is only one of her sources of magic, and it is one we must return to," Liam cautioned, as he continued his slow walk past the halfway point. "In her world, devices exist that record events of times past. In the case of the theft, only part of a griffin's wing was seen."

"Yes, but this is old news to us," Elder Ulrik stated. "Dayna has told us that the culprit had green feathers along his wings. The only griffin in this aerie who had such coloration was Lance Captain Thundercrack. Why bring this painful memory to the surface for us?"

Now it was my time to step forward.

"Because I was wrong," I said, and something inside of me made a painful twinge. This hurt, and not only because of the death that it had led to. Damn it, I was used to being *right*. "I was wrong, and someone used that fact to frame Thundercrack. The Lance Captain was

innocent of any wrongdoing."

A small chorus of caws from the griffins around us, probably members of the Valkir Pride. Again, I waited a moment before raising my right hand. The griffins finally went quiet.

"The color I saw on the suspect's wing was only a trick of the light. It appeared only under the strange lanterns in use at that dwelling. And again, I was wrong to believe that it was just a sheen to one's feathers." I looked around meaningfully. "Rather, it was a pattern as unique to the wing as fingerprints would be to my people, or the number of feathers atop each griffin's head."

The High Elder spoke next, and this time her voice had lost its skeptical sneer. "That is well and good. But unless thou hast brought these lanterns to our world, I see no use in thy information."

Liam completed his circuit and came back to stand by my side. Galen took a step ahead as well, subtly flanking me.

"It is true I have none of the special light to see by," I acknowledged. "But I don't need it. You see, the griffins are not the first people I have walked among. They are the second. The first were the fayleene. While there I learned something that few else know: their vision goes further into what my people call 'the visible spectrum'. That means they can see colors no one else can. That means Liam the Protector can see which griffin came to my world as a thief."

"Can this be true?" Belladonna breathed.

Liam inclined his head to her. "It is true, High Elder."

Now it's all or nothing, I thought. I cleared my throat.

"Protector," I asked. "Have you found the griffin whose wings match the pattern?"

"Oh, yes. I spotted it almost immediately," Liam replied.

He swung around and indicated the griffin with a tilt of his head. As one, the entire room looked to where he pointed to a single reeve.

"It's her, without a doubt." Liam said.

My heart sank.

His antlers pointed unerringly at Grimshaw's daughter, Hollyhock.

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Chapter Forty-Two

Liam's voice rang bell-clear. "It's her, without a doubt."

Hollyhock remained still, muscles coiled as if to spring.

"You spin a fine story," came a voice. Heads swiveled to see Lance Captain Ironwood speak from across the cavern. "Yet you have neglected to tell us three things. Why would a reeve seek to do these things? Why would anyone help her? And how would she cross to your world to commit this so-called theft? I think there are pieces to this tale that simply do not fit."

"Do you think so?" I retorted. "Perhaps you speak too soon."

"Then you have answers? Do share them with us, for I am skeptical."

I looked up at Belladonna. "I don't have the solution for the last of Ironwood's questions. But I believe that my answers for the first two will draw that final one out. That is, unless you wish to break the news to Grimshaw yourself?"

The High Elder fidgeted uncomfortably where she perched atop her boulder. Shaw's voice boomed from where he came to stand by Liam and Galen.

"Thou hast something to say regarding my daughter's guilt?" he growled, without an ounce of the respect he had shown earlier. "Speak to it then, Eldest. For to my simple 'lackey' mind, Dayna draws out a poison which hath seeped into this aerie!"

"I need not converse with thee, sire of the dishonored," Belladonna said sullenly. "It seems that thy human friend, the deceiver twice over, can speak to it."

I glanced over to Holly again. Her stance had not changed, but her head hung forward, listening but not looking. I had no choice but to continue.

"The answers to the first two questions are the same: *vengeance*. Vengeance upon the Council for the destruction of both of her eggs. Probably to be done in a way that my presence here interrupted

before it could be carried out."

The cavern remained quiet, but not silent. Most of the griffins looked away, while some nervously tapped a paw or nervously swished their tail. Shaw's expression slid into astonishment.

"Thou art right, Dayna," he breathed. "And they know. *They all know*."

"All that were present at the aerie when the punishment was carried out," I acknowledged. I raised my voice as I went on. "And it was a punishment, wasn't it, Eldest? I discovered only yesterday that Hollyhock hadn't helped me test her brothers. Instead, she took the test for each of them herself. I didn't know why, until I found flecks of shell and smashed pieces of nest in her dwelling. The shells belonged to two different eggs. Each egg came from a different sire. Whoever those sires were…had a genetic makeup that was extremely close to Hollyhock's own."

Shaw looked at me, shocked. "What…what dost thou mean?"

"Each egg was sired by someone in the family line. Someone even closer to Holly's genetic code than her own father."

"But…how?"

The words boiled out of me like hot pitch.

"How? What would you expect, when your three True Born were treated like outcasts for most of their lives? They had talents and abilities that should have put them into the top ranks of the griffins, but were they welcome at the mating rituals of the Autumn Winds? I was so blind, so new to your culture, that I didn't hear the words, I missed all the signs.

"Holly even told me the truth to my face, and I never saw it. She was the one who told me, 'I made my own family. Or at least tried to.' And the play-bites, the wounds that Galen told me are the signs of courtship? I've seen that exchanged before – between Hollyhock and her two brothers. Her two lovers. Her two eggs' sires."

Belladonna finally spoke in a hiss. "Incest cannot be tolerated in the aerie. That kind of breeding saps our species' strength. It is an abomination!"

Blackthorn let out a deep snort. "Your rule is an abomination."

I spoke again before Belladonna could protest.

"You certainly wanted to make your feelings clear, Eldest. For I found something even more interesting on the remains of Hollyhock's nest. Your DNA. And Elder Ulrik's. And that of the remaining seven Elders. If I had to guess, you wanted to make a point of punishing the 'children of arrogance'. So, you passed Holly up for Lance Captain, destroyed her young, swore all witnesses to secrecy, and then you forced her to *sleep on the remains*. Whether you feel this was justified or not, I'd say that this gave all three True Born plenty of reason to hate you."

"We promoted her brother Ironwood as soon as we were able," Elder Ulrik rushed to say. "What was done, was done. But we do not feel that True Born have no value."

"For that, I thank you," Ironwood said acidly. "Though your gifts of rank and speech in our favor are ones given out of guilt, not love."

Ulrik recoiled from Ironwood's words, though it was matched in its dark tone as Holly finally spoke. She raised her head as she spoke, and her eyes glittered like metal coins.

"The outworlder speaks the truth. The Elders arrived at my nest, only minutes after I had placed my newborns into the nest. I was exhausted from the birthing, and my two chicks' shells had not even hardened in the night air. I had no strength to pit myself against a single griffin, let alone nine. Dayna has correctly called all of the events, save for one: that the Elders forced me to *watch* as they smashed my lineage and let their yolk run into the dirt."

The cavern fell silent for a single moment. The boom of the surf edged up a notch, as if the ocean itself had felt the unrest in the room.

Then Holly raised her voice in a clarion call. "Griffins, will you stand to be ruled by this Council, which stands only for its own power, its hidebound rules, and its cruelty? Stand with me and my brothers in its stead! We will embrace the future, not fear it!"

Urgent whispers spread through the crowd around us. Uncertain whispers. I heard some of the louder voices.

She is right, the Elders stifle us!

Only oath-breakers would raise a hand to the Elders!

I won't fight for a True Born!

Now is our time, for the glory of our pride!

A drake with a black-feathered head spoke up.

"I am Wulfrik, newly chosen Lance Captain of the Valkir Pride," he declared. "That Hollyhock of the Reyka has been treated as a mewling chick is not my concern. The Valkir will never stand with those who slew my Captain, all to avenge tainted chicks sired by one's siblings!"

"Thou speakest true, Lance Captain!" Belladonna urged, grasping this first straw of resistance. "Defend thy rulers, attack the True Born!"

Wulfrik shook his head. "Thundercrack had no love for you or your old ways. Neither do we of the Valkir. You ignored our cries for justice when he was slain. You sought to placate these True Born by letting them slaughter our Captain! We shall no longer join our pride to this aerie! See to your own defense, if you can!"

With that, a fifth of the griffins present marched out of the room by one entrance or another. I heard curses and muttered oaths as some griffins exchanged harsh words with the Valkir.

Galen and Liam drew closer to me.

"I don't like the feel of this," Liam whispered. "Half of these griffins' loyalties waver in the wind."

"I must concur," Galen whispered back. "Also, I cannot tell which griffins to fight."

"I know," I agreed. "Just…defend against whoever attacks you."

"Might we still hope for a peaceful solution?"

I gritted my teeth. "Maybe. But Holly's shown her intent to take the Council down. She might think that this is her best shot, while–"

"Blackthorn!" Holly cried, "Ironwood!"

She dug at the feathers at the base of her neck. I spied a glint of silver chain as Holly brought out the tiny pendant I'd seen her wear on the very first day I met her. She squeezed it and spoke an incantation I couldn't hear over the crowd.

A piercing tone erupted from the very walls of the Lair with an ear-stabbing *SHREEEE!!*

My eyes teared up and I winced in pain. Galen clapped his hands

to his ears and staggered back, falling to all four of his knees. Liam let out a cry of his own and collapsed.

So did the rest of the griffins, save for the three True Born.

"Dayna!" Galen gasped, even as he pointed up towards the skylight. "The crystals!"

I craned my neck and saw a glitter from the rock face above the network of chains. Shards of pure white crystal had been set into the tiniest rock crevices around the rim of the opening. Whatever magically enhanced sound-based weapon Holly and her brothers had placed there, it didn't affect me as badly. I pulled my gun, held it in both hands, and aimed at the closest shard I could spot.

I fired three times. Two shots simply kicked up little puffs of dirt. One more ricocheted off the iron chains with a *twang*.

It was tough to concentrate. The *SHREE* just went on and on, rattling the fillings in my teeth.

Over the din, I dimly heard Ironwood shout "Stop her!"

Blackthorn leapt into action. He bounded towards me over the griffins who lay writhing in pain. I swung around to bring my weapon to bear. He was so damned quick that he was practically on me already. His huge body loomed in my sights like a charging grizzly bear.

Galen braced himself with one hand to keep his human torso upright. He raised the other.

"*Liom a heiceáil stoirme!*"

A bolt of blue lightning sizzled from the Wizard's outstretched palm. Blackthorn took it in the chest. The smell of charred feathers filled the air as he cartwheeled out of control, skidding across the floor and smashing into the far wall.

I didn't even turn to look. I doubted that even a dose of Galen's lightning would keep the drake down for long. I raised my gun again and got off another couple of shots.

A miss, followed by another ricochet off the steel chains. The bullet whined off and buried itself in the closest strung-up body of a Skinned One. The smell of burned leather and moldy bacon filtered down in a gagging mist.

I squinted as best I could at the crystalline shimmer. This time I aimed a little low.

A gentle squeeze of the trigger, just like I'd practiced with Esteban.

The bullet hit the rock, crumbling away some of the ledge. The crystal that had been perched above tumbled down. It struck the network of chains with a metallic *tingle* and shattered.

The piercing shriek of sound cut off instantly.

My ears still rang from the sonic assault. Shaw's three offspring shouted to each other, though I couldn't tell who said what.

"I want them dead!"

"Pay them all back!"

"We have no choice!"

All around us, griffins were snarling as they staggered to their feet. Many swayed as if drunk. I tried to rouse Liam, who remained senseless on the floor.

"Down!" Galen cried. I didn't hesitate, but threw myself over Liam's prone body.

Blackthorn had spread his wings and leapt into the air. He passed inches over us, but we weren't his target. He pulled up towards Belladonna. For her part, she reared up to fight him, though her reactions were slow and stiff.

One of the gray-furred members of the Council dove between the two. Blackthorn's talons came down in a killing strike, the Elder catching the blow across the side of the neck. The griffin's head sheared off in fountain of red-black and bounced across the cavern floor like a macabre version of my skipping stone.

The rest of the cavern exploded into violence.

Snarling, slashing griffins tore and bit at each other as wails and shrieks of eagles and lions assaulted my already abused eardrums. Galen surged to his feet, shouting an incantation that surrounded us in a circlet of blue light. A pair of griffins tumbled towards us, grappling and biting at each other. They rolled up against the circlet and then bounced off with a *thud*.

"My protective sphere won't hold more than a few seconds,"

Galen warned. “We must bring Liam back to consciousness and remove ourselves from this scrum. Otherwise, we shall be torn to pieces!”

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Chapter Forty-Three

The blue light that held back the mass of tumbling, slashing griffins had already begun to flicker. I grabbed the fayleene's furry shoulder, bent down, and spoke gently but firmly into his ear.

"Get up, Liam! You know I can't leave…without my good luck charm."

His eyes, one soft brown and the other emerald green, winked open. He stumbled upright, shaking himself off like he'd been doused with cold water.

"Such a sound!" he exclaimed, "I thought it would never end."

"It has, and so will Galen's shield. As soon as it fails, get clear of these griffins before you get turned into shredded venison!"

The words were just out of my mouth when Galen's spell winked out with a comical-sounding *foop*. The Wizard jumped to his feet and dashed for cover. Liam bounded the other way, leaping and ducking through the mass of rolling, snarling griffins. I turned and ran flat-out through the closest open spot I saw.

A single griffin, one I didn't recognize, swiped his opponent with a tremendous backhand, knocking him out. The drake oriented on me, razor-sharp beak agape and dripping blood. As he sprang at me, I thought: *Only a couple of days ago, I put my hand down that mouth.*

I dropped, converting my forward run into a slide. The griffin had expected me to dodge; he flew overhead, talons raking the air above me. With a *smack*, I slid against the cavern wall. My left leg burned from calf to thigh. I felt the blood-seeping tingle of road rash pop up in a sudden flush.

I did my best to ignore the pain as I scrambled to my feet. A serious twinge in my ankle made me limp, but it held my weight. The drake pivoted on its hind paws and turned to stalk forward. Blood madness had purged out all sentience. Pure animal instinct drove it now.

Grimshaw broke out of the mass of griffins. He came up from

behind and clubbed my attacker across the head with an unfurled wing. The drake fell, paws twitching, and then lay still.

Two more griffin foes moved to attack Shaw. One cried, 'For the pride of Reyka!'. The other rose up in a challenging roar, right before Shaw head-butted her in the midsection. I cringed as I heard the *crunch* of ribs breaking. I brought up my gun and kept squeezing the trigger until the griffin slumped over, bullet holes punctuating its flank.

"Dayna," Shaw shouted, "This battle is beyond thee! Get clear of it!"

Even as he dove back into the fight, I saw Galen backed into another corner of the cavern. He held off a pair of griffins with swipes of his wizard's staff. The two flared their wings, hissing, and dove in as one. Together, they clamped their beaks on each end of the staff and yanked it free of the centaur's grip.

Galen calmly spoke a series of words I'd once heard in the Fayleene Woods. The hiss of an electric hot plate came from the staff as its entire length turned white-hot. Greasy smoke puffed from the eye sockets of the two griffins who had taken the weapon in their beaks. They fell and lay still as the Wizard whirled to face yet another foe.

Holly was aloft, skimming just below the ceiling chains as she chased something on the ground. She banked sharply to one side as she followed her quarry. A caw of frustration as her raised wingtip grazed the chain network, almost sending her out of control.

Liam burst from behind a group of scuffling griffins, continuing to taunt her as she landed and shifted to a run.

"Come on! You're too slow in the air for a griffin! Let's see how well you do on the ground!" As Liam charged down one of the cavern's side passages Holly let out an eagle's angry shriek and disappeared after him.

I made my way along the wall, trying to heed Shaw's orders. But the closest exit was a narrow crack in the wall, and it was blocked by a heap of fallen warriors. The best I could do was hug the closest rock and put a bullet in any reeve or drake that got too close to me.

The battle grew even fiercer as more and more griffins succumbed to wounds. The remaining fighters began to give into blood madness. They blindly attacked anything that came into sight, even tearing at defeated enemy corpses.

I spotted two more council members lying still on the blood-smeared cavern stone, both flesh and armor ripped open. Judging by the number of griffins which fought alongside the remaining Elders, the majority of griffins had remained loyal to them. But Shaw's offspring kept the outcome in doubt.

Blackthorn smashed bodily through entire groups of drakes and reeves at a time. Yowls of pain filled the air as the huge griffin slashed through fur, feather, and bone. His brother Ironwood was almost as deadly, thrashing his tail to distract his foes and stabbing outward with his claws or beak.

The Lance Captain's second, the reeve I recognized from the pride-spar as Alfhild, moved to fight at Ironwood's side just as he engaged Elder Ulrik. Ulrik parried or absorbed Ironwood's blows, sparks flying as beak and talons scraped armor plate. Alfhild attacked the Elder from one side as Ironwood darted in from the other. Ulrik slammed the reeve against the wall with one mighty sweep of his paw. She fell and did not get up.

Ironwood darted into the opening, lightning-fast blows knocking the older griffin on his side. The Lance Captain pounced, landing on his opponent the same way Holly had pinned me. His rear claws came up. Ulrik's eyes bulged in fear and pain as Ironwood swept his leg down, tearing through fur and stomach muscle in a gout of blood and ichor.

The Lance Captain turned to see if Alfhild was still alive, and suddenly, Ulrik sprang up. It was more than I could believe. The Elder griffin had been mortally wounded. Loops of pink and black intestine hung dripping from his shredded belly. He landed on Ironwood's back, trapping him in a death grip.

Ironwood shrieked. His arms were pinned, his legs useless to attack a foe that clung to his back. His prehensile tail came up, tipped in razor-sharp steel. He stabbed deep into Ulrik's side like a dagger.

Once, twice, three times.

The Elder slid his forelegs up to Ironwood's neck, and with a last, convulsive gasp, he gave a twist. With a *crack*, Ironwood's neck broke. The two griffins fell dead, one atop the other.

Blackthorn, engaged with yet another griffin, saw his brother fall. With a vicious bite, he severed his foe's wing and pushed through the battle to reach his sibling. Grimshaw emerged from battle nearby and leaped forward, cuffing the larger griffin on the side of the head. Blood welled and ran across Blackthorn's beak as he re-oriented on his new enemy.

The two circled each other, slashing and biting like alley cats. Shaw dripped blood from multiple wounds, but as the two revolved around each other, I saw that Blackthorn also carried a gallery's worth deep bites and scratches. His tail kinked painfully at a forty-five degree angle, evidence that it had been broken. And his chest still bore the scorch mark of Galen's lightning bolt. If anyone was hurting, it was this drake.

"Sire, don't make me send you to the Eternal Sky," Blackthorn panted.

"I say the same to thee," Shaw gasped back.

The younger drake bulled ahead, deciding to use his massive bulk to pin Shaw and end the fight. But Grimshaw, veteran of many more battles, rolled with his opponent's motion. He lashed out with his hind legs to shove Blackthorn up and away in the same way Holly had out-maneuvered Thundercrack.

Blackthorn didn't land on a stalagmite. Aware to that danger, he spread his wings and made a single mighty beat to gain altitude.

That was a mistake. The huge drake shot straight up – directly into the network of chains. His bulk and raw power ripped an entire section free, the ends of the severed chains falling like a cast-iron net. With a despairing cry, Blackthorn plummeted back to earth, his wings and body badly tangled in the strands.

Yet as he landed, he still fought on, parrying blows from both Shaw and a second griffin. In doing so, he tumbled across the cavern floor and down one of the still-open passageways, Shaw limping after

him. Echoes reflected sound back up to me. Cursing, the sound of rattling chains, and the unmistakable sound of something big falling into water.

Then the hairs on the back of my neck stood at full attention as I heard panting from off to my side. I held my gun at the ready as I turned to face the newest threat.

Holly stood there, her feathers all awry, her fur a mess.

Her beak dipped in red.

With a horrifying shock, I wondered if it was fayleene blood.

"For God's sake, Holly," I gasped, "Did it have to end like this?"

"I think it did," she replied grimly. "There was no other way."

I leveled my weapon. "Don't make me do this."

She cocked her head at me. "Are you really going to shoot me, Dayna?"

I looked back at her. "Only if you come any closer."

Holly took a step forward.

I squeezed the trigger.

A *click* was all I got.

"We are so alike, you and I," Holly said sadly. "Neither of us bluff."

"You're right." I slowly slid my hand to my jacket pocket. It was a wild stab in the dark, but this was the only thing I had left. "Do you really need to kill me, Holly? Am I really that much of a threat?"

"I don't think so. But *he* does. The one who sent us to your world." She saw my movement and gave a little sniff. "Remember our talk at the Autumn Rites, Dragon-Hand? I know that you can't reload your gun before I cut you down."

My fingers found what I was looking for, and I grasped it for dear life. I'd only get one chance and then Holly would be on me, claws and beak tearing me to bits.

"Who said I was reloading?" I asked.

I pulled out what I'd taken on a whim from my office presentation bin.

It was a Class 4 laser pointer I'd inherited from whichever paper-pusher had previously used my office. Stupidly, I'd once used it as a

highly illegal presentation device. At twelve-hundred watts, the thing could start small fires and pop balloons if held on them long enough.

Without hesitation, I pulled it out and shone it into one of Holly's huge gold-and-jade eyes.

She let out a yowl of feline anguish, clapping her paws over her eye and rolling back and forth, trying to blot out the pain.

Suddenly, I heard Belladonna's high-pitched rattle of a voice.

"Art thou cowards or sluggards? We take her, while she remains helpless!"

The Eldest and three other griffins set upon Hollyhock and began biting and cuffing her. Holly's yowls turned to screams as the four griffins tore at her, talons ripped great gashes from her sides. A brittle *snap*, and one of her forelegs broke.

"Enough!" I cried, as I ran towards the fray. "I want her alive! I need her alive!"

The nearest griffin pulled his head back and snarled at me.

A bloody paw came from the corner of my vision. It smashed into the griffin's beak, sending him sprawling. Shaw, panting and dripping rivulets of sweat, pushed forward to shield me. His voice was raw, pure rage.

"Art thou deaf and addled? Dayna needs her alive! Stand down, lest I tear your flesh from bones!"

"Stand down," Belladonna repeated reluctantly. "I suppose we need her alive. For just a little while longer."

The two remaining griffins stepped back. Holly lay gasping where she had fallen. One of her eyes had swollen shut, one of her forelegs bent the wrong way. It made me wince to look at it.

"Thank you, Eldest," Shaw said. "As thou canst see, the contest has come down in thy favor."

I looked around. My friend spoke truly. The battle had ceased. The cavern floor was covered in a sea of bodies, blood pooling in the low spots. With a rush of relief, I spotted Galen and Liam across the room's expanse. Both looked battered, but not seriously injured.

Shaw spoke to Holly in a heavy, tired voice. "Thy allies lie dead and beaten. It is over."

“No,” Holly wheezed. “It’s not quite over. I want to tell Dayna… what little I can. She deserves to know.”

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Chapter Forty-Four

Holly struggled to an upright position as I came to stand before her. Shaw sat next to me, his expression grim and unyielding. Galen and Liam made their way over as well, their hooves making a loud clatter in the underground space of the Lair. Belladonna paced back and forth within earshot, casting hateful glances our way.

It hurt just to look at Hollyhock. The proud young reeve's body was a ruin. Bites and slash marks mottled her gold fur. Her broken foreleg quivered as she held it up somehow, and blood collected to drip steadily from her talons. Her left eye had swollen shut from the sheer number of blows directed at her head. Her right eye had a milky-white glaze from where I'd directed the laser into her cornea. I doubted if she could see much at all.

My words came out of a dry throat.

"I'm here, Holly."

"Dayna…" she rasped. Something broken rattled in the back of her throat. "I need you to know…for several nights after the Elders destroyed my young, I flew to the highest peaks north of here to vent my sorrow to the wind. That is where I met him."

Who? I wanted to cry out. But I forced myself to keep quiet as Holly went on.

"He was the one who struck a deal with me. With my brothers. He offered us a way to destroy the Elder Council and assume its place. He transported me and my siblings to your world, where we would find the crystals. Crystals that would have completely disabled the Elders, if we had gotten the time to place them all. Your arrival and my assignment to you delayed us too long."

"So all three of you broke into the museum."

"Aye. Blackthorn was the strongest, so he was chosen to rip open the vault door. He lost a single feather in that feat. I feared that would lead someone back to us, and I was right…"

"Never mind what thou dost fear," Belladonna snapped. "Tell us

who this ‘he’ is!”

“He is…” Holly squirmed, as if in even further pain. “He is the one who told us to murder Dayna. He is the one who sent Ironwood to slay Dayna as she slept, for I could no longer be trusted to do it.”

So it was Blackthorn’s feather that Ollivar found, I realized. *And that wasn’t a dream that I experienced here at the aerie. That was Ironwood, as he tried to move close enough to score a kill. Only Shaw’s presence deterred him from striking at me in the dark.*

“Thou wouldst have received stewardship over the aerie,” Shaw rumbled. “But what was promised in return for thy bloody bargain?”

A sigh. “He never asked for anything in return.”

“Tell me who you’re talking about, Holly,” I urged. “Please. This is important.”

“He is…” Her swollen face contorted as she tried to speak, but could not.

“Galen!” I cried, and he was there, lowering his hand to her face. The Wizard concentrated a moment, then spoke softly.

“She is under a *geas*, a spell of obligation. She cannot say the name of the caster, nor reveal any details about him.”

“Then her mind must be under his control,” Shaw said. I heard a note of desperation creep into his voice. “She hath been fooled, controlled, much like Dayna was by the spirit in the stone.”

Galen shook his head. “I sense no other magic upon her. I am sorry.”

Holly coughed, flecks of blood spattering her lower beak. “None of us were forced. We chose our path freely.”

“What of Thundercrack?” I asked gently.

“He wanted change, the same as us. I tried to bring him into our fold. I told him about your world, about the power we could use to disable the Elders and slaughter them.”

My mind flashed back to when Thundercrack confronted Holly before the Elders. Now his words made complete. When she had named the Lance Captain a traitor, he had responded ‘You call *me* a traitor?’ as if amazed that the accusation had come from someone who had said the same things.

“Thundercrack would not join us. The Captain didn’t want to replace the council so much as he wanted the Valkir to split away from the aerie. When I learned Dayna’s magic pointed to him as the culprit, I decided to kill two wyverns with one blow. I made sure to anger him, then I produced evidence to make him seem guilty. That would bring the Valkir to heel and throw Dayna off our track. I regret his death. I regret all the deaths, save those of the Elders.”

“Thou hast slain five of my Council brethren, including Elder Ulrik,” Belladonna shot back. “We shall not regret thy death either. Rather, we shall savor it.”

“Surely you shall.” Holly coughed again, bringing up blood mixed with yellow bile. She strained to make out both me and Shaw with her last working eye. “Now you know the whole truth, father. And you, Dayna. I am sorry. We should have killed you, I see that now. And yet I am glad that we did not. You were a true companion to my sire when I was false. I have lost my offspring, my lovers, and the honor of my family line. Our song is tainted forever. Our saga shall be trod into the dirt like the blood of my young.”

“Mayhap there is a way…” Shaw murmured. Holly’s head jerked up at that, but the High Elder had not heard.

“Thy family line shall be extinguished!” Belladonna thundered. “Thou art a false daughter, a false warrior, and a dishonored griffin! No, thou shalt not perish yet, young one! You shall join the ranks of the Skinned Ones the old way. The *slow* way.”

Belladonna’s rant faded into the background as so much noise. I heard only Holly’s wheezing breath, Shaw’s soft words, her softer replies. The voice of a father tucking his daughter into bed.

Shaw spoke as intently as I’d ever heard.

“What did I tell thee upon thy first-ever flight?”

Holly let out a breath that rattled in her throat. “You said…”

Then she nodded, as if she understood something. I looked back and forth between the two, not following along.

The High Elder droned on.

“We shall pluck your feathers from your wings!”

“Father,” Holly whispered. “I’m scared. Please don’t let them hurt

me anymore."

"We shall gouge your eyes from your sockets!"

"I shall not let them hurt thee. Thou must look to the sky. I will do what must be done."

"Our knives will peel your flesh for days, till you beg us for death!"

I had a sudden, horrible feeling.

Holly tilted her head back. A single tear flowed down her face.

Shaw darted in, grasping Holly's throat in his beak.

He twisted, and then *pulled*.

He ripped his daughter's throat out in the blink of an eye.

Blood fountained from the base of Holly's neck, the stumps of her carotid arteries spitting blood with the pulse of her still-beating heart. Blood splashed across the side of my cheek, scalding hot. It got in my eyes. It landed in my mouth. Filled it with the taste of rusty iron.

I screamed. I don't know if I said anything. Perhaps I just wailed in agony. My mind had gone somewhere else. Somewhere red and dark and full of pain.

Holly fell to the ground bonelessly. I slumped to my knees, grabbing at her, feeling the slickness of her blood plaster my hands. Her feathers, her fur slipped through my fingers like so much wet cloth. I called out her name again and again.

A spasm, and Holly jerked her unbroken forelimb up to her neck. Catching the silver chain on one talon she pulled, snapping it. Convulsively, she jammed the pendant into my hand. She squeezed it into my palm, pressing it painfully into my flesh. I held on to her fiercely, felt her talons dig into my skin.

Then it was over.

The milky film over her one open eye went blank.

She was gone.

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Chapter Forty-Five

I sat at the desk in my study, staring at a letter.

I tried to read the damned thing, but my eyes kept sliding off the page.

My chair moaned another creak as I shifted in it, pleading with me to oil it someday. But I didn't have the will to do it. After all, I lacked the will to focus my eyes long enough to read an official-looking piece of paper.

That lack of willpower had dogged me all week. I found myself sitting at my desk, staring into space until my stomach told me it was lunchtime. Or until the maintenance crew came by to clean after everyone else had gone home.

My mind was elsewhere.

To say that I'd gotten a blunt dismissal from the Reykajar Aerie would be understating things. In fact, I'd been very politely shown the door, and it didn't matter if said door hit my ass on the way out.

A rain squall had blown in just as the remainder of the aerie had shown up, drawn by the mass exit of the Valkir Pride leaders and the horrific sounds of battle from inside the Lair of the Elders. Though it had felt like an eternity, the actual fight had taken only a few minutes. Griffins were tough to kill, but they were even better killing machines. I couldn't imagine how anyone would be able to mop up all the blood that had been spilt that day.

The rain didn't prevent Galen from commandeering a couple of the newly arrived griffins. He had them fly through the gap torn in the iron chains and collect the remaining phantom quartz to return to his laboratory for study. Liam worked with the seemingly endless stream of wounded left from the fight. Often, he was only able to dull the pain of a mortal wound.

Cold droplets fell through the skylight and pelted High Elder Belladonna as she faced me. The Eldest hadn't come through the battle unscratched either. She held a hind leg stiffly, avoiding putting her

weight on it, and a deep slash ran down her shoulder.

"Thy fayleene may vouch for thee," she said with a scowl. "But thy purpose here did indeed wreak havoc upon my people."

"I never intended–" I began.

"Nevertheless, thou hast done what was required of thee: the culprits of the theft have been found. And punished." She focused on me as best she could with both her normal and wandering eye. "But the price hath been steeper for mine own people than I ever thought possible. Dost thou think it was worth proving yourself right?"

"I don't know," I said, nettled. "Do you think it was worth proving your visions true?"

Her beak snapped closed. She looked away for a moment.

"Our two best Prides have been sacrificed," she moaned. "The Reyka hath been nearly exterminated. The Valkir are now sundered from our aerie. More than half my Council lies here as carrion for the crows to feast upon. 'Tis a bitter cup to sip from."

"True," I said, though my own bitterness welled up within me. "Yet what did you end up paying the price for? I don't think it was for proving that your visions were correct."

"Then what dost thou think it was for, outworlder?"

I thought of the life of deprivation that Holly must have led. Griffins were social animals, even more so than humans. To be alone while in a crowd for all one's life must have been a rare and singular torture.

Was it any wonder that Holly turned to the only griffins that showed her kindness and love to sire her eggs?

"Belladonna, I think you just found out the price of your Council's rigidity. Of your readiness to force your people to follow archaic rules, to keep their silence. That's what drove Thundercrack and his Pride to desert you. That's what drove Holly mad, at the end. I think you need…to consider change."

The Eldest's voice crackled in outrage. "Thou wouldst have me approve of incest?"

"No, of course not. I would have you approve of the True Born, though. To make sure that they aren't treated as outcasts. I would

have you give your younger griffins more power to determine their chosen directions in life. Perhaps even allowing the younger griffins to join a council originally meant for only the Elders."

A scraping sound came from where Belladonna rubbed her talons against the rock wall. "That is much to ask for."

"Maybe. But even one of those changes would have stopped all this before it got out of control. Whatever 'he' that Holly spoke to could never have gotten hold of her desperate desires if she hadn't been so embittered."

"I shall brood upon thy words," the Eldest said, straightening herself up as best she was able. "Hear my words in turn: Tell thy king that thou hast fulfilled thy duties here, though at much cost. We shall continue to send our best warriors for the Air Cavalry, but only on two conditions."

"I'm listening."

"First, that he orders your 'brush magic' completed to assess the health of my remaining warriors."

I nodded. "He won't object to that."

"Second, that he grants a boon to me, as the reigning High Elder of the Griffins."

"Yes?"

"The boon I request is simple: That he forbid thee upon pain of death from ever returning to Reykajar Aerie. For thy company is unpleasant, and the price of thy lodging is one we *never* wish to pay again."

I flinched as if she'd slapped my face. Belladonna turned her back on me and stalked off.

The other griffins followed their Elder's lead. Everywhere I went, they turned their back on me or refused to look in my direction. I sat alone in an out-of-the-way spot for a bit, staring at the pendant Holly had pressed into my hand.

It looked like a strange flower or seashell at first glance. But the most interesting quality to me was that it had a catch which revealed a secret compartment. The compartment was empty, but it could hold an object roughly the size of my thumb. At least I now knew how

Holly had snuck in a crystal shard to plant on Thundercrack.

Liam and Galen got word of my dismissal and came to join me. They didn't say much, and I steadfastly refused to shout, to scream, to cry in frustration.

We walked out of the Lair, emerging at the top of the long downward slope to the griffin border. The way looked rough, tumbled, and all but impassable to me now. But I heard a familiar voice, and I turned to look.

Shaw sat at the cliff's edge, overlooking the sea, a fire burning brightly beside him. He chanted under his breath, nodding towards the flames. An iron bar lay with its point in the coals, slowly turning red hot.

"What is he doing?" I asked softly.

"An expunging ceremony," Galen replied. "It is to erase the memory of part of his immediate family. As with most griffin rituals, it is elaborately painful."

"Dare I ask what you mean?" Liam put in with a shudder. "The condensed version, please."

"The ritual includes the piercing of one's flesh with shark teeth and bramble thorns. Followed by the burning of flesh with hot iron. Yet, I think the pain he endures will be less than the pain he seeks to escape."

"I don't understand," I muttered. "Grimshaw told me that dishonor stains an entire family line. It becomes part of the song of that family's saga, effectively removing it from existence."

"Not quite. Dishonor must be formally conferred upon a warrior by the Elders once he or she joins the ranks of the flayed…what the griffins call 'The Skinned Ones'."

That's right, I realized. *Shaw told me that dishonor to a line would only come 'should such a griffin fall into the hands of the Elders'.*

Holly's last thoughts had been for her remaining family: Grimshaw. She had said, 'Our song is tainted forever. Our saga shall be trod into the dirt like the blood of my young.'

Shaw had replied: 'Mayhap there is a way.'

His daughter had understood. Killing her deprived Belladonna of a

final victory: destroying Grimshaw's family name.

And it had saved Holly from being tortured for hours, even days. It had saved her from an agonizing death. Yet, I had been agonizing over Shaw's choice to murder her for days now.

I felt the sudden warmth of Holly's blood on my face again.

I got up suddenly from my desk. Pulling back the curtains, I threw open the windows, gulping down the less-than-fresh air of Los Angeles.

Sometimes, I realized in a flash, *If you truly cared for someone, you had to accept things about them you weren't all that happy about.*

Part of me would never be happy about what Shaw had done. But I had to accept it. I cared for him as much as for Liam and Galen. He'd acted in accordance with his griffin mores, his griffin knowledge. His people weren't humans in funny eagle suits, nor were they some special effect made for the movies. They had their own alien, but understandable, code of ethics.

That settled in my mind, I went back to my desk and picked up the letter again.

This time the contents stuck. And they made me slump back into the creaky desk chair. I'd gotten the results of my firearms certification test.

Range Performance and Safety: 85/100.

Written Portion: 25/100.

Average Score: 55/100.

The word *FAIL* was written on the bottom line labeled 'Result'. It was Lieutenant Ollivar's handwriting.

But that wasn't all.

The *FAIL* had been crossed out.

Underneath, the words *CLOSE ENOUGH – PASS* had been printed.

And signed.

By Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy.

I took stock of the situation. I'd solved the mystery of the museum theft, if not in my world, then at least in Andeluvia, where it really counted. I'd prevented the assassination of the entire griffin Council of Elders. I'd passed my firearms test. I was off probation and back on

the force. And to top it off, all my past problems with the LAPD had been expunged.

I would be free to return to duty with the Office of the Medical Examiner.

I would be free to return to Andeluvia and join Fitzwilliam's court, once I reported in to him.

So why did I feel like I'd lost everything?

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Chapter Forty-Six

Morning sun shone through the leaded glass windows in one of Fitzwilliam's royal antechambers. As it happened, the window in this room held the pattern of a rampant griffin. I didn't know if that was an omen, or just plain old irony giving me the middle finger again.

I paced back and forth, opening and closing the leather-bound folder that held my notes. Providing an unwelcome background murmur was the muffled voices, laughs, and shouts of Fitzwilliam's noble court. It was lively in there today, and I wondered whether the king would be as bored-looking as the last time I'd seen him.

If he was, I was pretty sure that he'd be a lot more interested after I'd read my report. Technically, it was a group report, but only one of my three additional members were present. Galen stood off to one side, arms crossed patiently. He watched me with growing irritation until he finally made a wry comment.

"Dayna, should you keep pacing to and fro, I believe that you shall wear out a footpath on King Fitzwilliam's best carpet."

That stopped me, figuratively and literally. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm a little nervous. The last time I was in front of the court, I got some rough treatment. And I made yet more mistakes. The kind that's starting to worry me."

Galen raised a shaggy eyebrow. "More specificity, please."

"I mean that I've always prided myself on talking my way out of a tough jam. Being fast on my feet mentally, that sort of thing. But lately…it seems like all my quick escapes are coming back with a price attached. And those prices are piling up…in a way that's going to haunt me."

"You refer to the quick solution that ended up sending you to the griffin aerie?"

"Yes, in part. I mean…outsmarting McClatchy on my probation hearing. Outfoxing him when he found us in the morgue. My pretending to be a conspirator with dark forces, just to get into the

aerie itself. It's like I'm sowing a lot of bad karma, and it's not going to wait until my next life to bite me in the butt."

"I don't understand many of your idioms, but I believe I follow the main course of your concern." Galen uncrossed his arms. "Perhaps you are being too hard on yourself. The unexpected happens to everyone. And in unusual situations, the unexpected cannot help but increase in both size and degree of strangeness."

"The story of my life," I sighed. "I just wish that Liam and Shaw had decided to join us. I don't want us to go in there without everyone's testimony at hand. Plus, having a fayleene around still counts for a lot here. I think Liam will help put a damper on the higher-octane jerks that sit up at that table."

Galen covered his mouth with a hand, stifling a laugh. "You have a unique way of describing those of the court who show their high spirits. Be at ease. Liam is changing into his ceremonial garb, in order to bring appropriate gravity to our presence."

"What about Shaw?"

The centaur's face grew serious. "Grimshaw has ensconced himself in the next room over. He has been…emotionally distraught for the past week. Even now, he is in a state of mourning."

The thought of my friend in distress automatically moved me to action. I took a few steps towards the door before stopping in my tracks.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Given what happened…what he had to do at the aerie? I'd still be in mourning over my offspring as well. Assuming that they've all actually returned to the Eternal Sky."

"It is a practical certainty. Blackthorn was enmeshed in multiple iron chains as he fell into the sea."

"Did anyone find his body?"

"Belladonna sent out her remaining warriors to search. They found naught but a tangle of chains on the sea floor. But that is no proof of his survival. Predatory fish and a surge tide could easily have pulled him out to sea and dismembered his body."

"I suppose…"

Galen shrugged. "Consider the drake's size, his wounds, and his

state of exhaustion, I'd say it is highly unlikely that he could have torn free of those chains before running out of air."

I mulled that one over a little more. What Galen said made sense, but Shaw's words came to my mind.

Blackthorn is one of the best warriors, and he can perform feats I never thought possible for any griffin.

A proud father's words, perhaps. But Sirrahon had also disappeared. And he was a hell of a lot bigger than Blackthorn.

I didn't like that at all.

Galen interrupted my thoughts as he spoke again. "If I may, I believe that you may be operating under a misapprehension."

"Huh? About what?"

"About Shaw's mourning. You seem to feel that it is over the fate of his True Born offspring."

For some reason, that made my cheeks flush. "What else could it be? He had to…you were there, you saw what he had to do."

"True enough. But I would posit that humans and griffins are rather different in the way they approach grief. It has to do with the way griffins process externalities versus internalities."

I groaned. "Please, go a little lighter on the language, Galen. You're going to give me a headache."

The centaur considered. "Are you familiar with how the griffins mentally construct their privacy?"

I nodded. "If, as a species, they believe in something enough for a cultural reason, it simply becomes fact. A half-wall becomes a full one. Roofless houses become roofed dwellings."

"Then consider the ritual we saw Shaw performing upon our departure from the aerie."

I sucked in a breath as I remembered.

"An expunging ceremony. To erase the memory of part of his immediate family. That means…his True Born offspring."

"To him, it is as if they never existed." Galen re-crossed his arms. "To act otherwise would jeopardize the reputation of the rest of the family line. The sixteen namesake offspring might find themselves pariahs, even more so than Hollyhock ever did."

I found myself trying hard to absorb these alien ideas. It seemed to me another harsh reality of the griffin world: dishonor meant more than banishment, even more than death. It meant complete deletion from society. It meant that all trace of your passing was erased as easily as footprints from the beach at high tide.

I shivered. “Then if he isn’t mourning them, what is he mourning?”

The centaur gave me a knowing look. “You spent a good deal of time with the griffins, yet I wonder if you have come to understand them as much as one might hope.” He shrugged and added, “We have some small amount of time before we are called in. Perhaps the best course of action is to simply talk to him.”

There was nothing I could say to that. I left the room, walked to the next, and rapped on the door.

No answer. But Galen had said that Shaw was there, so I turned the door handle and pushed my way inside. The lighting in here was dim, as most of the shutters had remained closed, bookcases and furniture left untouched and unused.

Grimshaw sat hunched in the shadows, facing resolutely away.

I let the door close. “Shaw, it’s me.”

A grunt was all I got in response.

I moved closer. Shaw’s many wounds had been relatively minor. His decision to wear extra armor had saved him a great deal of pain and recovery time, but his forelegs were studded with small, pockmark-shaped scabs. A serious burn over his brow was only starting to scar over.

“Shaw, your forehead…”

“I have been burned before,” was his terse reply.

I stood by his side a little longer. “Will you join us when we go into the throne room? King Fitzwilliam needs to hear all that we have learned.” I cleared my throat as I added, “It doesn’t feel the same without a heroic drake at my side. To have the strongest, most experienced veteran warrior to guard and guide me.”

“Worry not. I shall be there.”

A few more moments passed in complete silence. I felt the

awkwardness growing, so I turned to leave. I had just reached for the door handle when Shaw spoke once more.

"Dayna," he said, sounding like had had to force out each word. "What I did at the end. To that young reeve…I wanted thee to know. If thou hast cursed me for that, I swear that I shall do my best to bear your hatred."

Realization hit me like a ton of bricks dropped by a griffin on my bone head.

Shaw hadn't been in mourning for Holly, Ironwood, or Blackthorn.

He'd been mourning the death of our friendship. The destruction of his connection with the little family that had somehow been forged in the months past. And no matter what Liam or Galen might have told him, it was my voice that counted. To a griffin, I was the High Elder, the heart of the matter.

I went back to stand next to him. This time, I rested my hand on his warm leonine shoulder.

"I could never hate you, Shaw," I said softly.

Now he turned to look at me, his eyes shining.

"What happened…it's taken me some time to work through it. I've wanted to tell you some of the things I've thought about. Will it hurt you…if I use the reeve's name?"

He shook his head.

"I wish that you didn't have to kill Holly. But her fate would have been nightmarish without you, and your family's name would have been left in tatters. You gave her the most honorable way out.

"I'd have liked to call Holly a friend. But I don't think she ever would have been one, not really. Because she wasn't true. Not to her people, not to the Elders, certainly not to me." I squeezed Shaw's shoulder gently as I added, "The only griffin who has been steadfast to me is you, Shaw. You've been and always will be my friend, the first and best griffin I've ever known."

Shaw's eyes brimmed over. He let out a joyful sound, then turned and embraced me, rubbing against me like a gigantic cat, the way I'd seen animal trainers get hugged by their tigers or lions. I hugged him back, and when he finally let me go, I scratched him on the top of his

head, just the way he liked it.

In between the rumbles of his purr, he spoke again. “My thanks to thee. I would be honored if thou wouldst accept me back into Galen and Liam’s company.”

I beamed at him. “You were never *not* part of it, you big lunk.”

He purred anew for a moment, but then shrugged off my hand. I studied him curiously as he gave me a serious look.

“I must tell thee my mind, now that I know my counsel is accepted again.” I nodded, and he went on. “It is more important than ever that I, Liam, Galen, and thee work together from now on, as much as we can.”

“I’m not objecting, Shaw. But why the urgency?”

“I am a plain warrior, you know that. I am no tactician, no strategist like…others were in the Reyka Lances. But canst thou not see what is taking place all around us?”

I shook my head, not understanding what he was getting at.

“Good King Benedict’s murder and the rampage of the dragon Sirrahon are the means to something, not the end. In the past half-year, the humans and centaurs were a feather’s breadth from being at each other’s throats. The Protector of the Forest was killed. Because of that, the fayleene were nearly destroyed, their ancestral home burnt to ash. And now…more than half the griffin Elders are dead. Our lances hath been depleted in a fit of madness. One pride destroyed, another in revolt against the aerie, and many of my people’s best warriors lie slain.”

“Add to that the appearance of the ethereals like the *pouquelaye*,” I said. “And the apparent disappearance or intentional seclusion of the Parliament’s Albess.”

Shaw shuddered. “Aye. Even a simple warrior as I now sees the hand of darkness moving the pieces on the board.”

There was a rap at the door. With a clatter of hooves on the marble floor, Liam and Galen joined us. The Wizard looked scholarly and formal in a brand new burgundy jacket, while Liam was resplendent in his green jeweled barding.

“The royal pages just informed me,” Galen said primly, “That we

are expected before King Fitzwilliam and the royal court."

Liam canted his head at me and Shaw. "It seems that you have snapped our resident grump out of his seclusion."

Shaw let out a snort. "Leave it to thy antlered friends to make light of serious matters beyond the reach of their cervine minds."

"Wait a minute," I said, before the two started at each other again. "Liam, you're wearing green again!"

"Why, yes," Liam said, preening a little. "It is the customary formal attire of the fayleene when visiting other creatures' demesnes."

"Then what was with that reddish getup you wore at the aerie?"

"That? Oh, that was a barding I had made for just such a contingency. I was worried about the griffins there acting as uncivilized as Grimshaw. Uncivilized meaning: 'Oh, look, thou art a delicious stag, let us take a bite of thee'."

"My kind cannot help it if we have hungers that match our refined tastes," Shaw shot back.

"Which explains the barding," Liam continued, pointedly ignoring Grimshaw. "Galen did some checking for me regarding griffin culture. According to his research, the red, orange and black patterns are visual code for 'don't eat me, I'm poisonous'!"

For the first time in a long while, Grimshaw's laughter joined Galen's and mine. And come to think of it, I did remember seeing griffins backing away in horror from Liam's arrival.

"Thy research is sound, Wizard," Shaw said, still chuckling. "'Tis such an effective ruse, perhaps we should all start wearing red and orange from now on."

"That might not be a bad idea," Liam agreed.

Shaw was right about many things. Events had begun to follow the outlines of a dark pattern. We would need to be there for each other more than ever from now on.

"So, gentlemen?" I asked, "Are we prepared to speak our mind with the king and his nobles?"

Grimshaw nodded, Liam bowed, and Galen replied, "Indubitably."

I walked confidently to the throne room with my friends at my side, ready to give King Fitzwilliam our final report.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *Grand Theft Griffin*, the third book in the 'Fantasy & Forensics' series. I've always been a big fan of griffins, which until recently got the inglorious role of 'flying mount' or 'air support' in many fantasy stories. Instead, I wanted to explore what it might be like to visit a living, breathing griffin aerie.

Thanks for joining me in that exploration,

Michael Angel

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BOOK FOUR: A PERJURY OF OWLS

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Chapter One

I don't trust joggers. They're always the first ones to stumble across the dead bodies. And they always seem to have the same alibi: they were just 'out for a run.'

That said, I've never managed to pin a murder on one.

Just give it time, I figured. *My rotten luck is probably all that's holding me back.*

I pulled the OME van off the side of the road and stopped by a small park. Actually, calling this ratty patch of grass and trees a 'park' was like calling a badly pilled scrap of wool a cashmere sweater. This restful little bit of 'green space' came with sporadic-at-best gardening services and seventy decibels of traffic noise from the multilane freeway opposite a chain-link fence.

I shut off the engine, got out and went around to throw open the van's rear doors. The call I'd gotten from the dispatch officer was clear: the LAPD was looking at a suspected homicide, so I needed to suit up. I pulled a 'one size fits most' white jumpsuit from a storage bin and then sat on the rear bumper to get my gear on.

Four uniformed officers were busy talking with each other about ten yards further into the knee-high grass. Off to the right, two more cops questioned the jogger who'd stumbled across the corpse. One of the questioners raised his hands to his mouth, blew on them, and then rubbed his palms together to keep them warm.

I zipped up the jacket and bent to slip on my Stompy Gothic Boots of Doom. I tried and failed to keep a smirk off my face. On autumn days like this one, the thermometer could dip below the ubiquitous balmy sixty degrees. Around me, the local Angelenos were already putting on windbreakers and complaining about how nippy it was outside. I'd grown up in rural Illinois and then went to school in Chicago. We didn't break out the winter coats and thermal underwear until it dropped below *zero* degrees Fahrenheit. Southern California, for all its positives, could thin the blood and make one soft.

One quick tuck of the hairnet and one Angels baseball cap later, I hefted my crime scene gear case out of its compartment. My stompy boots let me crunch my way through the desiccated shrubbery without a problem. As I joined the police, I was surprised to find that only two of the four officers were actually in uniform.

The third officer's face broke into a toothy smile that shone from a dark smudge of five-o-clock shadow. My on-again, off-again boyfriend, Homicide Detective Alanzo Esteban. At least, that's the best term I had for him. It sounded ridiculously high school when I said it in my head, but I was stuck with it until I came up with something else. Or until our relationship got the breathing room it needed to take a turn for the better.

The final member of the group made me pause for a moment. She had wiry, coffee-colored hair that had been French-braided into submission and tied up in a bun at the back of her head. Her skin tone was a couple shades duskier than Esteban's, and it complemented a pair of razor-sharp cheekbones. Light glinted from the badge at her belt, and a holstered gun made the side of her jacket bulge. The jacket was made of plain blue denim, which looked as no-nonsense as the expression she wore behind a pair of black wire-frame glasses.

"Okay, the OME's here," Esteban announced, gesturing to the two patrolmen. "We can take it from here. In the meantime, I want a sweep done from the south end, make sure we didn't miss anything."

A pair of nods, and the blue-uniformed cops went off to begin their task. I craned my neck to look over the line of yellow tape. To my amazement, it didn't look as if a herd of elephants had gone tramping through the area.

"I'm impressed, Detective," I said honestly. "This looks…just like a crime scene should."

He shrugged. "My partner and I were feeling lazy today, so we decided not to move the body. Next time we can drape it over something, give it just the right dramatic touch."

I did my best to keep my expression neutral. *Partner?*

"I keep forgetting that you two haven't met," Esteban realized, with a snap of his fingers. "Dayna, this is my partner, Detective Vega."

Vega nodded brusquely at me.

"Good to finally meet you," she said. Her voice carried the trace of an accent that sounded like Esteban's, but a little more exotic to my ear. "Just call me Isabel. Or 'Vega', if you want. I'm still trying to get used to the whole 'Detective' thing."

"Fine by me," I agreed, nodding back.

"Vega's been assigned to work with me. It's the typical one-three deal," Esteban informed me. "You mind showing her a couple things you taught me about preserving the crime scene?"

"Sure thing," I said, after a split-second hesitation.

"Thanks," Vega put in. "Esteban's always telling me about how experienced you are."

Well, that was good to know, I thought, filing away that information for later.

Aloud, I said, "The first rule is to avoid disturbing the most fragile types of evidence at a crime scene. Sometimes that can be the pattern of an impact mark, or a surface that could hold fingerprints. Here, out in the open, the most important thing to try and preserve are any tell-tale marks that might be left on the ground or in the grass."

"I put up the tape and did a round of photos before you got here," Esteban added. "I'll send the pictures over to the OME when we get back. Not much to go on, the grounds hard and bone dry. We might get some shoe prints out of it. I got one easy match to the jogger's running shoe, but that guy checks out clear. He was just out for his morning run when he spotted the body."

"Yeah," I grumbled. "That's what *all* joggers say. Likely story."

"What was that?"

"Never mind. What about blood spatter?"

"None that I saw."

"All right," I breathed, "let's go in. Vega, follow in my tracks, or Esteban's. Try to disturb as little as possible. And no touching or moving anything without my say-so."

"Goes without saying," she agreed.

I lifted a length of the crime-scene tape and ducked under. Esteban came next, followed closely by his partner. I found myself

getting a little testy as I wondered when Esteban was finding all this time to tell Vega about me, and then mentally chastised myself. Not only did that line of thought have a whiff of jealousy running through it; I could answer the question easily on my own.

The LAPD did their best to avoid 'green on green' situations, where a rookie was paired with another inexperienced officer. That was just asking for trouble. The 'one-three' arrangement Esteban mentioned was where the brass paired up a newly promoted 'Detective I' like Isabel Vega with a relatively senior 'Detective III'. Given that Esteban had been doing a lot of stakeouts lately, it would be natural for him to chitchat with his assigned partner.

The body lay face-down, arms down at its sides, in a tall patch of desiccated weeds. I craned my neck and saw a second path made up of crushed grass and weeds leading to the corpse. Before I could ask about this, Esteban filled me in.

"That's the original path made by whichever bunch of *pendejos* decided to drag our friend out here and dump him early this morning." He pointed to where the path petered out as it led back to the sidewalk. "It's what caught our jogger's attention."

Vega squinted for a moment before adding, "Based on the width of the path, I'm guessing two people carried the body between them as they lugged it over to where they dumped it."

I nodded agreement. By then I'd taken a couple more steps forward and knelt within arm's reach of the corpse. This work wasn't for everyone, but I could switch on my reptile brain and let the information flow into my consciousness quickly and with clinical accuracy. The evidence of death, even recent death, rarely fazed me. But the act of murder sure as hell did. The horrible death of Captain Vazura still flashed through my dreams at odd times, making me toss and turn. I'd had my first true batch of nightmares in the past week. I would wake up, gasping, the iron taste of Hollyhock's blood in my mouth.

I put those thoughts out of mind.

The corpse belonged to a reasonably fit male in his mid-to-late twenties. Later, I would note that he wore a set of baggy trousers and

loose-fitting athletic shoes. Right now, I was too distracted by a startling trio of details.

First, the bottom three inches of the deceased's shoulder-length black hair was tipped or frosted in neon blue. Second, he had been laid out naked from the waist up. And finally, someone had cut a message into his broad, reddish-white back with a box-cutter or razor blade.

SALIR DE LOS TRECE.

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Chapter Two

My knowledge of Spanish just wasn't up to the task.

"So what I'm seeing…" I ventured. "This is something involving the number thirteen?"

"Close." This from Vega. "It means, 'Get out of the thirteen'. Well, this neighborhood is kinda-sorta close to Thirteenth Avenue. That's gang territory, at least when you get up by Cypress and Glassell Park."

"Maybe," Esteban cautioned. "But we're talking about a forty-minute round trip in a low-rider. That's really stretching it if someone is sending a 'stay out of our territory' message."

While the two detectives talked, I busied myself with studying details about the body. Taking note of the placement of the body's arms I muttered, "They're down at the side."

"What's that, Dayna?"

"Just thinking aloud. The body's arms are down at the side, not akimbo. That tells me this corpse wasn't just thrown here. It's been carefully placed."

Esteban came over to stand at my side. "Well, that might support the 'send a message' theory. Wish we could tell who sent it."

"Maybe we can," I said grimly. I sat my case down and cracked it open. Handing him my trusty old Pentax, I asked him to take some photos of the body where it lay then I pulled out two pairs of plastic gloves. Slipping on one pair I handed the second to Vega.

She swallowed hard as she took them. "What…what do you want me to do?"

"First, put them on," I instructed. "Then, I need you to kneel next to me, over here by the body's thigh. We're going to flip him over."

"Are you sure–"

"Pretty sure. The words on this guy's back were designed to get attention, like a flashy stamp on an envelope. I'm betting that the rest of the message is on his other side."

Vega fumbled with the gloves as she put them on. "No, I meant – are you sure you want me to touch him? You said not to, earlier."

“I said no touching anything without my say-so. Now I’m saying so.”

A sigh. “You’re the boss.”

She stepped into position and knelt, hands at the ready. Again, my mind went off onto another tangent. Vega had slender, fit arms and an admirably flat tummy. Her jacket and slacks were plain, but they complimented her figure. By comparison, my getup made me look like I was wearing a discount sleeping bag. Esteban couldn’t help but notice the difference.

Dammit, what was wrong with me?

I let out a breath. Luckily, I didn’t choke on the following inhale. This guy hadn’t been out for long, and the day had been cool. He registered maybe a three on the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness (patent pending). Vega was visibly trying to hold her breath, but at least she hadn’t shied away yet.

“Okay,” I said, sliding my hands under the body’s upper arm. “Count of three.”

“Ready.” She slid her hands under the body’s thigh.

“One-Two-Three,” I recited, and we gave a heave.

The corpse rolled over surprisingly easily. Vega reeled back, almost putting her gloved hand to her mouth in disgust.

“*Hijo de puta*,” she cursed, as the corpse’s face came into view.

Esteban placed his hand on Vega’s shoulder. To steady her, I guess.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” she coughed.

“It’s all right,” I remarked. “Not everyone is cut out for homicide work.”

Esteban raised an eyebrow at that, but kept quiet.

Vega shook her head. “Just…give me a second.”

To be fair, turning the corpse did ratchet the smell up the Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness from a maybe-three to a sure-as-hell-six. That happened sometimes when you changed the position of a body. The accumulated gases from decomposition escaped unexpectedly from a body orifice, providing an olfactory surprise.

The front side of the corpse was purplish from lividity. The man's features were broad, heavy-boned, vaguely Hispanic or Native American. His eyes had gone white, sunken, and waxy. I ignored the crawling insects around the mouth as I took a probe and pushed down his lower jaw. As I suspected, part of the decidedly gag-worthy smell came from a thick residue of vomit along the tongue.

Vega steadfastly refused to look at the dead man's face. Instead, she asked her partner to take some pictures of the tattoos on the corpse's chest. Then she bent closer, frowning as she made out the word 'Gangster' done in a flowery-looking script at the base of the neck. Her frown deepened as she looked at a small five-pointed star on the left pectoral, a number '13' being fired out a stylized cannon, and finally the silhouette of a hooded, praying woman.

"What do you think, Isabel?" Esteban inquired. "This is your area, not mine."

"I think…" She leaned back on her heels. "This is totally *chueco*. None of it makes sense."

Welcome to my world, I thought. "Maybe you can fill me in, then. These look like gang tattoos, so far as I can tell."

"Yes and no. They are, but they're all wrong." She began pointing at the images as she rattled off her facts. "Nobody's tattooed 'Gangster' on their skin since…well, at least in the past few years. Wastes too much 'ink space' for other markers, like prison time. These days they use the letter 'G', or the number '7'. The five-pointed star looks right, it's the catch-all for Hispanic gangs in this state."

"He does look like he might be the right ethnic group," Esteban observed. "Hard to tell with that blood cast on his face. Might be Samoan, or Lebanese."

"Either way, it doesn't fit. That marker has to be visible right away, so it only goes on one place: the web between the thumb and index finger. The '13' doesn't fit either. It's a marker for the members of *Sangra Norte*. That's the gang closest to this neighborhood."

"Would they be the ones up on 13th Avenue?" I asked.

"They're the ones, yes."

"Maybe that fits in with the message carved on this guy's back."

She shook her head. “No. Think about it. Why would they send a message that says ‘stay out of our territory’ by killing one of their own?”

That stopped me. “I…you’re right, I think. Unless our friend here betrayed them somehow.”

“Then they’d have done a lot worse to him than toss his body into a park. You’d have found stab wounds and blood everywhere. I’m not seeing any marks on the body so far.” She sighed. “At least the Lady’s in the right place.”

“Let me guess,” I put in, touching a finger to the praying woman’s outline. “That would be the Mother Mary?”

“Yes, though we’d call her the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. It’s to ask forgiveness for any crimes committed.”

Now I sat back on my heels, impressed. “You do know your stuff, Isabel.”

Her face brightened for the first time. “Thanks. I know enough to tell you what we’re *not* seeing here. But as to the rest…”

My eyes went back to the Virgin Mary tattoo. I touched the skin at the edge of the design and a frown of my own blossomed on my brow.

“Well now,” I remarked, “it looks like we’ve got something else interesting going on here.”

Esteban leaned over, his shadow blocking the sun. “What do you have, Dayna?”

“Watch this.” I pressed my thumb into the edge of the tattoo and then released the pressure. The skin blanched a little, then returned to its reddish-purple state. “The ink used in a tattoo is actually injected into the dermis, or second layer of skin. We see it through the epidermis, or outer layer. Given the lividity on this side of the body, I’d expect to see some distortion in the color and shape of the tattoo when I press the skin.”

“But we’re not seeing any,” Vega said, completing my thought. “Now that you mention it, these designs are awfully crisp for the usual street-tat. So if the pigments aren’t under the skin…maybe they’re on the top?”

We said it at the same time: “Henna.”

“Right,” Esteban agreed. “Say it’s henna paste. This really is *chueco*, then. Why would anyone put *temporary* tattoos on a body designed to send a gang-related message?”

“Maybe it’s not the message we think,” I murmured. Vega looked at me, ready to ask what I meant, but Esteban knew how my mind worked. He caught Vega’s glance and held up a hand, telling her to wait. To let me sort out a hunch.

I moved back up to the body’s head, grabbing a hunk of the shoulder length hair. It was oil-slick black, except for the bizarre three inches at the end. I’d caught the faintest whiff of something *sweet*, buried under the layers of odor that surrounded the corpse. The only out-of-place thing I saw that matched the out-of-place scent were these neon-blue highlights.

I lowered my nose to take a cautious sniff of the dyed strands, closing my eyes to try and make sense of it. I got a soapy, almost coconut smell that I dismissed as conditioner base. The sweet undertone wafted back again, and I locked onto it.

It was syrupy, but not grassy or woody, like sugarcane from a tropical field. This was straight-up refined sugar. My mind jumped from cookie batter mix, to caramel, then to movie candy. Halloween candy, the cheap kind. From cool fall to warm summer days, little children playing out at the kiddie pool, coming in hot and sweaty and wanting a glass of something that tasted red and sweet and came out of a fat glass pitcher…

My mind did one of its little *clicks*.

“Well, I’ll be,” I said, with a shake of my head. “I should have known.”

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Chapter Three

The origin of the syrupy-sweet scent finally coalesced in my mind.

"That's flavored drink mix," I said. "You know, the powdered stuff moms used to mix up and serve the kids. It all tasted the same, only the colors were different."

Esteban snorted. "Are you kidding?"

"Nope. And I think I know what we're seeing here." I let the hank of blue hair fall from my fingers as I continued. "You can dye your hair bright colors by using drink mix powder and conditioner instead of water. It's cheap, and it's gotten awfully popular lately with one particular group: the rave party crowd."

"So you think our guy wasn't a gang member…but he liked late night drug parties?"

"I'd stake a couple of paychecks on it," I agreed, as I stood up. "Not all raves cater to the hard drug crowd, but I've seen more than one body like this. I'm guessing that you have a new underground rave drug club in town, and they're really scared right now."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the traces of vomit, along with that 'message' we found. This poor guy either outright overdosed, or choked to death. Say that the organizers of the party find him, can't revive him. What would you do, if you're panicked and need to dispose of a body like this?"

Vega got up in turn, her lips pressed into a tight grin. "If I knew someone who could do henna tats, I'd have them come up with some gangster-related designs, and then leave the corpse in a way that makes it look like it's a gang-related murder, not an OD at a rave party. Keeps the heat off them, puts it somewhere else."

"That's what I'm thinking," I agreed, as I began to pull off my gloves. "This is a crime…but it's one crime that's disguised to look like another, completely different one."

Vega gave me a new look, one that seemed surprised and impressed at the same time. "Looks like Esteban wasn't just making

noise."

"I don't make noise," Esteban pointed out. "Not when it comes to Dayna's talents. I'll ask our friends in the Narcotics unit what they've been seeing out in this area."

"And I'll go put in a call to the OME. I need someone else to bag and tag this body for your investigation."

"You plan to take some samples before then?"

"Not this time," I said. "I'll have them do it at the lab."

Esteban glanced at me, puzzled. "Is that the new SOP now?"

"Just today." I stashed the gloves in a separate biohazard waste bag, then offered it to Vega. "Isabel, I have to speak with Esteban for a moment. I'll send him back to you in a bit."

"No problem," she said, as she peeled off her gloves and poked them into the bag. "It's not exactly like our raver friend is going anywhere."

I took back the Pentax from Esteban, stashing it and the used bag in my crime scene gear case, locked it up, and lugged it back to the OME van. Esteban followed me as we crunched back through the brittle underbrush.

The van's rear doors opened with a *creak*. I put away the case and sat on the bumper to start unlacing my stompy boots. Esteban took a seat next to me before he spoke.

"So, what's on your mind? Except for one thing – that being anything related to Andeluvia – you can say it in front of Isabel."

"Just that one thing?" I asked. "What exactly *have* you been sharing with your 'partner'?"

"Oh, tips and techniques, that sort of thing." I made as if to elbow him, and he laughed. "Kidding, kidding. Come on, I'm not going to share that with a 'partner', no matter what gender they are." He stopped and looked at me. "You weren't serious, were you?"

"No, not really. Okay, maybe a little," I admitted, as I put away my boots and unzipped the shapeless protective suit. "She's a good-looking woman."

"*You're* a good-looking woman."

"You're a flatterer." I still liked hearing that, though. "I suppose

that a small part of me wishes you'd said something about getting a partner like her."

"Dayna…" He rolled his eyes.

"I know, I know. Don't worry, I don't want to go over that ground again, I swear."

"Maybe we can call it even. You can be a little mad that I didn't tell you about Isabel, and I can be a little mad that you didn't tell me about going on one-third time to get more involved with that other world."

Now I smiled. "That's the best bargain I've heard all week, bar none. Deal."

"Good. And speaking of our secret fantasy world, I'm hoping that they can cut you some slack this weekend. I've still got that nice evening out planned, if you're interested."

Alanzo had suggested this to me a few days ago. I'd eagerly circled the date on my day planner, first in pencil, and then in bright blue permanent marker.

"Oh, that?" I smiled to myself as I tried to keep my tone offhanded. "Yes, I suppose I can make time. I'm glad you said something, it might have slipped my mind."

He threw me a glance to see if I was still kidding around, but I was poker-faced. "Yes, glad I did…I was hoping for last weekend, but it just wasn't going to happen. I got trapped working the door for the hordes of 'trick or treaters' that showed up at my *tía's* place."

"I was pretty busy that weekend too," I said.

That was a bit of a dodge. I'd actually planted myself in bed for Halloween. I ignored the holiday and spent the time sleeping, recovering from a week's worth of depression and insomnia over the recent events at the Reykajar aerie.

I'd used up the next day being grilled by Fitzwilliam's court. I don't think I won any hearts or minds among the Andeluvian nobility, but that didn't bother me as much as I thought it would have. I'd gotten a victory of the kind that I truly treasured – when Grimshaw and I had reconciled over the same events. I needed the big lunk of a bird-lion more than I cared to admit.

And there was one more thing that happened. Something that wouldn't be resolved until this very afternoon.

"In fact," I added, "you were right. About why I needed to speak to you privately."

"Andeluvia." At least he didn't say it like a curse word.

I nodded. "They need me there for the rest of the day, so I can't stick around to finish the crime-scene work."

He seemed to chew this over in his mind, then nodded. "You have to take care of what you need to, Dayna. We'll manage here."

I squeezed his hand one more time, then watched his retreating form as he walked back into the tall grass to confer with his officers. I got my regular shoes back on, closed the van's rear doors, then slipped into the driver's seat. The glass greenhouse of the van's windshield had turned the cabin into a steel-and-fabric sauna, so I quickly cranked down the windows to get some air. Then I located my phone and put a call in to the OME's admin center.

It took me a few moments to navigate through the automated call menu until I got the department admin who normally handled the schedule.

"Naomi, it's Dayna," I said. "Looks like I'll need to call in the schedule transfer like we talked about. Definitely need a bag and tag."

The sound of rustling papers. "Gotcha. Looks like I'll have to pull Myun-Hee from en route to Durham Boulevard. I'll let his boss know. Martinez won't be pleased, but we have to do it."

That surprised me. "I thought that Shelly Richardson's people were covering this shift."

"They are, but Martinez is supervising today. Didn't you hear? Richardson's still out."

"Still out?" A chill went down my spine. "She's called in sick… what, three, four days ago?"

"Think so," Naomi replied, in a disinterested voice. "To be honest, I haven't had time to check the records."

"Did she leave a message or anything?"

"I don't see anything. Actually, she hasn't even called in sick past that first day. After that… she just didn't show." A *beep* sounded in the

background. “Whoops, I’ve got a call on another line, is there anything else you need?”

“Not now, thanks.” The line clicked off, leaving my head spinning for a moment.

Shelly rarely if ever called in sick. But then, she’d been present at the standoff between Deputy Chief Robert McClatchy and a young, magically gifted pooka by the name of Destry. I was sure the mind-bending powers Destry used on Bob had somehow affected her mental stability. She’d been out every now and then for the past month, but never for this long.

I needed to follow this up. But, dammit, I needed to be in Andeluvia this afternoon, or my time there could very well be forfeit. I hated to do it, but I turned the ignition key to get the van’s motor running and promised myself that I’d check on Shelly the very next morning.

Forty minutes later, I got the van parked inside the garage. The roll up door hadn’t even touched the driveway before I locked everything up and ran into the house. Hurrying to the bedroom, where I’d carefully laid out my chosen outfit early this morning, I slipped into the bathroom to set out all the cosmetics I wanted to use, as well as the multiple torture devices I would need for my hair.

A quick disrobe, shower and towel off later, I slipped into the same sleeveless, blue-green dress that Fitzwilliam had fancied when I’d attended his coronation. I found myself turning in circles in front of the mirror, making sure I looked presentable from all angles, then I went to work on the hair and makeup. Luckily, I still spent enough of my time at the OME offices proper, so I wasn’t out of practice when it came to what my grandmother would have called ‘gussying up’.

When I was done, I tried to look at myself at least halfway objectively.

You’re a good-looking woman, Esteban had said.

I suppose that I looked okay. As far as I was concerned, I had a pale hacker’s tan from all the time I spent staring at computer screens, and my hair resembled a bundle of stringy black yarn. The green eyes helped, at least when they weren’t bloodshot from lack of sleep, and

my chin was pointy enough to chip ice.

I'd never had too much of a problem attracting men in the past. In fact, during my college years I had to learn a special scowl to drive them off. Now, I wasn't so sure. Working with dead bodies didn't exactly put me in the right social circles to find top-quality dating material.

Looking at the clock above my dresser I realized I didn't have time for any more introspection. Slipping on my high heels, I carefully walked out to the center of my living room. I had to get going or I'd be running around shouting 'I'm late, I'm late!' like the white rabbit in some fairy tale book I'd read.

In fact, I realized, I was stepping into my very own fairytale right now.

I grabbed the medallion infused with Galen's portal spell and took a deep breath.

I was excited to be heading back to Andeluvia.

After all, I was about to be made a *Dame*.

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Chapter Four

A flash-bang of white fire, and I arrived in the turret room I'd more or less commandeered as a gathering place for me and my friends. As always, the strain of the magical transport left me off-balance and with a stomach that urgently wanted off the merry-go-round. Making matters worse, I'd made the trip in high heels.

I wobbled on the damn things like a drunkard on an all-night bender. Thoughts of showing up at my own ceremony with a ruined dress, a skinned knee, or worse flashed through my head. A pair of hands caught my flailing arms and steadied me, long nails pressing unexpectedly into my skin.

"Be at ease. I have you," said a female voice.

My head jerked up as my eyes snapped back into focus. The woman who'd saved me from a nasty fall was roughly my age and height, with a bony face and figure to match. She had long black hair, a flowing gown that matched it, and similarly dark makeup that made her resemble a depressed teenager playing with the 'goth' look.

"Lady Behnaz!" I exclaimed.

"The same," she agreed.

She held on to me for a moment longer until she was satisfied that I wasn't going to fall over. Then she stepped back to look at me critically. At least the look was one of judgement, not flat-out hostility. Behnaz and I had been a classic 'hate at first sight' pair of women, and it had only gone downhill from there.

I'd pissed off her husband and later called out her infidelity with her lover, Captain Vazura. Then Vazura was killed within minutes of entering my service. And to top off the sundae of dislike with an over-sweet cherry, she'd caught me on her castle grounds, all while plotting with my friends to have her murdered. Yes, there were some serious extenuating circumstances each time, but let's be honest. I wouldn't have wanted to be the defense attorney in my own case with that set of facts.

But Lady Behnaz had been a bigger person than I'd first given her

credit for. For one, she'd realized that Vazura's death hadn't been my fault. She'd also come to realize that my bulldog tenacity could be of use in finding Vazura's murderer. I'd repaid her faith in me by closing the case and having the culprit tossed into the ocean deeps. So while she had to disparage me in public, privately we had buried the hatchet.

At least, I hoped so.

"Dayna, Lady Behnaz is present at my invitation," came Galen's cultured voice. From off to my side, the centaur stepped forward into the light. Galen's dark locks and tail were shiny and freshly combed, his brightly polished silver buttons glistening against the wine-colored fabric of his jacket. "As I have only been to a single knighting ceremony, I felt it incumbent upon me to consult with one more experienced in court affairs. I judged Lady Behnaz to be a suitable choice in this matter."

"Well, you've got one ceremony's worth of experience on me," I admitted. "I guess that I've got to defer to your judgement. And that of Lady Behnaz, I guess."

"That is wise," Behnaz acknowledged. "I won't steer you wrong today."

The words escaped my mouth before I even thought about it. "You won't?"

"No, I shall not. Dayna, I know we have not been like kin since you came to my world, but you kept your promise to me. It won't bring…" Behnaz paused, taking a breath before continuing. "It won't bring my love back, but you have helped me. Now it is my turn to help you, at least in some small way."

That sounded like a nicely buried hatchet to me.

"Thank you," I said simply.

Lady Behnaz pursed her lips and made a circular motion with her hand, indicating that I should turn around. I complied, feeling more than a little like a bug under a microscope. As I did so I got a look around the room, which was lit by glowing balls of magical werelight. Although it was still daylight, the windows had been plugged by the heavy shutters. The wooden table that normally dominated the room

had been moved further away from the dark mass of hearth. A set of open chests sat in its original space. Each chest overflowed with richly colored fabrics or glistening gemstones.

"Perhaps a quarter-hour remains before we are summoned," Galen noted. "At that time, a royal escort of pages and Commander Yervan of the Palace Guard shall arrive and convey us to the antechamber outside the throne room. There, we shall meet the Protector of the Forest and whichever representative of the Reykajar Aerie the High Elder has chosen to send."

"Not Grimshaw?" I asked, surprised.

"Grimshaw has been here at the palace, so when Belladonna received notice, she had to send someone she could actually give the order to. In any case, Grimshaw shall be present as well. As will a multitude of other people."

"Turn to face me again," Behnaz instructed. I did so, though my stomach had taken another lurch at Galen's words.

"A multitude?" I asked, my voice coming dangerously close to a squeak. "I thought this would be a ceremony between myself, King Fitzwilliam, and…I don't know, some of the lords? I'm not exactly on everyone's Christmas list, even with those folks."

"I don't know what a 'Christmas List' is, but I can guess," Behnaz said, as she went to rummage through one of the larger chests. "Whether you are well liked or not, you have become a regular topic of conversation among the members of the court."

"That's something else that I could use your advice with. I mean, how the royal court works, and what I'm expected to do! The King sort of sprung this whole 'Dame' thing on me out of nowhere after I gave him the report on the griffins."

"Ah! We are in luck. I have something that matches the colors you've picked." Behnaz pulled out a pair of ankle-high soft booties from a chest. They were fawnskin brown and done up with light green lacework. "Your footwear is meant to charm, but trust me: You do not want to chance falling over when you are dubbed."

"Right." I didn't really understand, but I stepped out of my heels and into the booties. They fit snugly, but they were comfortable

enough. My impromptu fashion consultant then pulled a new article of clothing from another chest.

"Oh, as for 'what you're expected' to do? I wouldn't be overly worried. The King will likely send the Lord Pursuivant to you after the ceremony to describe your specific duties."

Galen cleared his throat. "Given that Dayna has not been steeped in our world's culture from childhood, then I would venture that a basic explanation regarding her new status would greatly assist her at this point."

"I suppose…" Lady Behnaz straightened out the fabric and brought it over to me. She held up a shiny, floor-length cloak in a shade of green that reminded me of water drawn from a tropical sea. Seed pearls glinted along the fringe as she brought it around my shoulders. She gave me a direct look. "Tell me what you know of our customs in this matter."

"Okay," I breathed. I hadn't been expecting a pop-quiz, but I figured that it was fair enough. "As best I can tell, 'Dame' is a noble title for a woman, roughly equal to 'Knight' for a man. In daily parlance, one would use 'Dame' in the same way that you'd address a knight as 'Sir'."

Lady Behnaz straightened out the cloak so that it flowed over my shoulders. "Very good. Continue."

"In your world, 'Knighthoods' and 'Lordships' are based on the exchange of land for military service."

"That is close, but not in the gold. Lordship is indeed based on an exchange. The lord gets ownership of land, the peasants that live upon that land, and lordly power over his demesnes. In return, he must pay tax monies to the Exchequer and provide knights to serve the King in times of royal need."

She paused for a moment to fasten the cloak into place with a silver chain and a pair of metal clips shaped to look like snapping dragon heads. "A knight gets a smaller amount of land and fewer peasants to work it. This is exchanged for supplying service in the form of his taxes to the Exchequer and his body for military service. If a man is knighted by a lord, then he must devote himself to serving

both his knightly order and that specific lord."

"But what if that man…that *person*…is knighted by the King?"

"If knighted by the King, the knight's title does not change. But he or, in this case, 'she' receives a higher status, one akin to the middle rungs of lordship. For example, though you may not order another lord's knights into battle, you are within your rights to give them most any other command. At a single stroke, you shall be above the salt."

Above the salt? I frowned, trying to understand. It was probably some local slang meaning 'above reproach' or something similar.

"There we go." Lady Behnaz stepped back to regard her work. "Your basic dress was fine, if a bit unimaginative. Since wearing jewelry is frowned upon during knighting ceremonies, I think we'll pass on adding rings or bracelets. It is a pity about your corset and bodice, but that requires a more thorough fitting. You'll just have to make do."

"My corset? I'm not wearing–"

"Precisely. It would have been better if you'd employed something of the sort to…shall we say, 'elevate' the appreciation of one's charms."

Abruptly, I felt a little flustered. I wasn't what the men's magazines would call 'stacked', but I had my bra on, and felt comfortable with what nature had given me. I pointed at the gentle scoop neck that graced the top of my outfit.

"Okay, I didn't show up with plunging cleavage, but do you really think that would be necessary in a ceremony involving…um…Dame-hooding?"

"The ceremony is called an 'investiture'."

"Whatever. Look, I don't see where the amount of breast I'm showing matters."

Lady Behnaz gave me a strange look. "Perhaps my advice is needed more than I thought at first. Very well. Are you aware that we of the Kingdom of Andeluvia have no queen at present?"

"Yes," I said, feeling more than a little nettled by the whole thing. "I'm pretty sure I'd have noticed it if King Fitzwilliam had gotten married anytime recently."

"Are you aware of whom he is courting, then?"

"I wasn't aware of anyone he was going out with, actually."

"That's because he hasn't. I have it on good authority that he's given a skirt-tumble to the occasional palace handmaiden, but that's it. Do you see what I mean?"

"Well, I won't say that I'm all that keen on his behavior. But I don't think you folks have the same laws on the books against sexual harassment."

A tired sigh. "It is possible that the King is preserving his bachelor status in order to cement an alliance with a neighboring land via marriage. However, it is equally likely that his heart is open and as ready to be plucked as a properly ripened peach. *Now* do you understand?"

"Wait, wait. Are you suggesting that I 'cultivate' his interest? Me?" My stomach took another lurch as I contemplated the idea. "But I'm not of this world! And I'm not even a member of the nobility!"

Lady Behnaz's face broke out in a smirk. "What say you, Court Wizard?"

"Dayna's statement is correct," Galen said, after a moment's thought. "To be precise, Dayna's statement shall remain correct for the next twenty minutes or so."

I gulped. "What do you mean?"

"Dubbing you as a Dame marks you permanently as a member of his court, thus a woman of this world in all but birth. And, given the status of one raised up by the ruler of this land, you thus achieve a social standing that would make you eminently marriageable to the King himself."

And then, just as I was trying to digest *that* juicy bit of information, someone rapped smartly on the chamber's wooden door. Galen trotted forward and swung it open. With a clatter of footsteps, Commander Yervan tromped in, his gold-plated armor glinting in the werelight, s quartet of court pages decked out in robin's-egg blue tunics flanking him.

"It is time, Lady Chrissie," he said, with a florid bow that was marred only by the creaking of his armor's leather straps. "King

Fitzwilliam and all the nobles of our fair land await your presence."

Praying that no one would see my knees knocking under my dress, I joined the group with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner being led to the gallows.

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Chapter Five

The light tread of the company's feet and the swishes of my floor-length cloak were the only sounds to accompany my progress down the long corridors of Fitzwilliam's palace. The quartet of pages weren't supposed to talk, so I guess that made sense. Commander Yervan strode proudly at my side, fully immersed in his role as *Guarding the Dame Apparent*. Even Galen, who clopped along at my other side, looked distracted, as if he were going over lines for a play in his head.

Me, I was doing my best to stay in my happy place.

I wasn't all that fond of crowds, though with a little discipline I was fine speaking in public. Certainly, when push came to shove, I could do my part. According to what I'd been told before by the King, all I had to do was say 'I so swear' at appropriate intervals.

Maybe I was just being a little gun-shy. I'd had more than a little rough treatment at the hands of various courts and councils. The first time I'd ever met the Andeluvian nobility, they'd simply walked out on me *en masse*.

Now that Fitzwilliam was here, I wasn't sure how much better things were. What Lady Behnaz had been implying…could there be a grain of truth in there? Fitzwilliam had reacted like a healthy heterosexual male when he'd gotten a gander at me during his coronation, even with my apparently underwhelming scoop neck dress.

And he had been supportive of my employment in Andeluvia. Right up until both his court and the Parliament had dug their heels in. That told me his loyalty to my cause had sharp limits. But as to my 'investiture'…if he was doing this as a prelude to wooing me, then it was an awfully indirect way to do it. Frankly, it was ridiculous!

So why did the mere prospect bother me?

My thoughts were jarred back to the present by a young man's voice. One with a ghosting of an accent that I'd always thought of as Gaelic.

"Dayna!" Liam cried. "You wear green, just as I. Surely that is a

good portent."

The Protector of the Forest, now a strapping twelve-point stag, trotted forward a few steps to greet me. I only had to bend slightly to embrace him, all the while being careful not to dislodge the emerald-encrusted headpiece nestled atop his head between his antlers. A similarly jewel-encrusted barding draped along his back, which made my fayleene friend sparkle.

We now stood in the antechamber outside of Fitzwilliam's throne room. The great high-arched doors were closed and attended by a pair of royal guards, who had come to full attention now that their commander was present. Behind the doors I heard the fuzzed-out words of a speaker, followed by the dim murmur of a large crowd in response.

"I'm wearing green for luck," I said, as I let him go. "But even so, I'm not sure that I could face this crowd without a fayleene leading the way."

"Oh, you'll be fine," he reassured me. "The ceremony is quite straightforward, and you are well-attired for it. In fact, that's the second most stunning outfit I've seen you in."

"Second most?"

"Well…" he cleared his throat as he added, "I felt that you filled out the noble form of the fayleene in a most attractive manner. Goodness, the Lead Does' antlers would steam if they heard me say that!"

We shared a laugh over the idea before Galen spoke up. "The representative of the Reykajar Aerie draws nigh. He said that he has seen you before, though you do not know him."

That perked my curiosity. The drake that joined us in the increasingly crowded antechamber did look familiar, though I couldn't put my finger on where I'd seen him. He was a recently matured griffin to my eye, with no especially distinguishing marks about him save for three recently healed scars marring his golden coat. Newly sprouted feathers dotted a swatch of one wing, and he limped as he tried to keep his weight off his right hind leg.

"Greetings, Lady Chrissie," the griffin said, as he made a clumsy

half bow. “I am Gorse, formerly of Ironwood’s Lance. The High Elder felt I would do you honor by my presence.”

Suddenly, I recalled where I’d seen Gorse before. He’d been the badly wounded drake I’d seen after Ironwood’s attack on a horde of wyverns. As best as I could tell, ‘badly wounded’ in griffin terminology meant ‘unfit to fly, at least one broken limb, and bleeding like a freshly slaughtered bull’. I was amazed that Gorse had pulled through.

“I am indeed honored,” I said. “You were sent by your Lance Captain to head along the beach towards Kescar and notify them of the attack on their fishing fleet. I’m glad to see that you made it. Honestly, I thought you’d pass out from blood loss along the way.”

A gruff chuckle came from the drake’s throat. “Though it would shame my Lance to admit it, I did pass out. Twice. Luckily, both times the surf rolled in and submerged my head, which worked well enough to rouse me.”

A thought occurred to me. “Didn’t you serve directly under Hollyhock?”

Gorse straightened up a little. A look of both pride and hurt came into his eyes. “I did. I have since learned of the events that took place in the aerie while I was recovering in Kescar. Though I do not approve of her attempt to overthrow the Elders, I shall always be proud of having served under her.”

“As you should be,” I agreed. “If I may…I might like to talk to you sometime. About what it was like serving with her.”

“I would be glad to.”

“And I’d be interested in hearing the latest news from the aerie. When I left, it was in a…well, a troubled state.”

A shrug. “I can only say so much, given how busy I have been. High Elder Belladonna has been busy selecting replacements for her new Council of the Chosen.”

I gave the drake a look. “Wait a minute. Of the *Chosen*? Not of the *Elders*?”

“Oh, aye. The High Elder felt that, given recent events, it would be wise to recast it as one based on viewpoint, not on age. At least one representative must come from each of the remaining prides. There

were a lot of ruffled feathers when the Korlson Pride sent a True Born, but Belladonna did not object!"

That came close to flooring me. Oddball that Belladonna was, she'd proven to be more open minded than I'd expected. Of course, the rebellion of an entire Pride and the annihilation of another could do a lot to change one's mind in a hurry.

"That's amazing, Gorse. You've made my day. How exactly has Belladonna been keeping you busy, anyway?"

Another chuckle, this time with a ribald tone. "Since I was in Kescar recovering from my wounds during the revolt of Grimshaw's True Born, it turns out that I am the only remaining male of prime breeding age in the Reyka Pride. It's been up to me to help rebuild our numbers as quickly as possible."

I did my best to keep the smile off my face. "I see. Well, best of luck. That's a big responsibility."

"If only I had known before accepting the task," he sighed. "I haven't gotten a decent night of sleep in over a week. My flanks are a mat of bruises from mating bites. My poor aching back threatens to buckle. And the *chafing* around the base of my…"

The blare of trumpets cut off the long-suffering drake's recounting of his coital problems. Yervan made a motion to the pages, who advanced to open the door to the throne room. Galen came to stand on my left side, Gorse at my right. Liam moved so that the Fayleene Protector of the Forest could lead me in.

"Very well," Commander Yervan stated formally. "Dayna, you shall enter these doors as Lady Chrissie. You shall emerge as Dame Chrissie. Are you ready for your investiture?"

I set my jaw. "I'm not getting any readier, or any younger, waiting here, Commander."

A grin flashed across his face as he signaled the pages. With a push, the doors swung open to the brassy fanfare of yet more trumpets. Liam moved out. It was all I could do to force my feet to move, following his gleaming, bejeweled back and his white puffball tail.

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Chapter Six

The throne room wasn't just full. It was *packed*. In fact, it was a standing room only crowd that any celebrity worth their length of red carpet would have drooled over. And the red carpet treatment was exactly what I'd gotten.

A broad scarlet carpet carved out a path leading from the door to the throne. Although it didn't have stanchions and velvet ropes to hold the crowd back, no one dared set foot across the black and gold embroidered fringe.

My neck joints felt like they had frozen in place, but my eyes darted back and forth, trying to make sense of the overwhelming mass of people. Fitzwilliam's cavernous throne room had a set of odd snake-coil columns that held up the stone roof and a series of stained glass windows that punctuated each alcove. Despite the light from the windows, the icy blue of the alcoves could make the place feel cold as well as empty.

Not today. It was warm from all the bodies packed in, and most of the people that made up the crowd weren't nobles. They wore pastel-colored linen gowns or dark brown overcoats, and the smells that wafted through the air included freshly tanned leather, peppery spices, and animal dung. I'd guess they were mostly from the local city merchants, craftspeople, even some well-to-do farmers. Sprinkled in among the masses was the occasional palace guard, each clad in mail or plate armor under red and black livery.

Everyone wore an expectant and happy look upon their face. I doubted that anyone was happy specifically for *me*. My investiture was simply the most exciting court event that had happened in a while. The citizens of Los Angeles would've reacted the same way to an unexpected Rose Bowl Parade or Academy Award ceremony.

I snapped my focus back towards my front. As the room narrowed, the pastel tints of linen gave way to the brighter dyes that colored the garments of the true nobles. Blood red mantles, short capes, and gold plated belt-and-dagger sets were common among the men. In contrast,

the women went more for sky blues and grassy greens for their ankle-length gowns. Said gowns had massive bell-flared sleeves and were trimmed with pearls or little silver bangles.

And there, at the very end of the carpet, waited the King and a retinue of pages.

King Fitzwilliam stood proudly upon the large raised platform next to his jewel-studded throne. He cut a pretty good figure for a monarch, in my admittedly sparse experience. He had inherited his father's high-domed forehead, long nose and prominent chin. His mane of shoulder-length blond hair had been liberally salted at the temples with a dash of silver that matched his light gray eyes. Taken as a whole, he had a noble, if somewhat weary or put-upon look.

The King had been dressed to the nines for this event. He wore the crown of Andeluvia, a polished-until-it-gleamed gold circlet stamped with the silhouette of a rampant griffin. A fur-trimmed mantle of rich royal purple draped over a tunic the exact color of French champagne. Each satiny piece of cloth gleamed with bands of complex embroidery. Even the King's distinctive point-toed shoes had been trimmed in shiny gold and black.

Off to each side, a group of trumpeters raised their long-necked instruments to their lips. They blatted out a quick succession of notes. The room fell silent as my party came to a stop at the bottom of the three steps that went up to the platform. Fitzwilliam raised his hands in greeting.

"I greet thee, ambassadors of the Fey, the Centaurs, and the Griffins," he stated formally. My ears perked a little as I heard him using the archaic speech of the older griffin generation, but it sounded right coming from him today. He lowered his arms as he asked, "Hast thou brought one of noble countenance and pure heart for their investiture?"

Liam, Galen, and Gorse surprised me by replying as one: "We have brought such a person, great King of Andeluvia."

"Then present the subject so that I may judge with mine own eyes."

Gorse stepped forward and bowed before Fitzwilliam. "I present

unto thee Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels, she who unveiled the threat of the Darkness to my Aerie."

Galen stepped forward next, bowed from his human waist, and then said, "I present unto thee Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels, she who restored the Kingdoms of Centaur and Man to peace and friendship."

Liam was the final one to step up. He made the same sweeping bow with his antlers that I found irresistibly cute. His voice echoed through the throne room on the heels of Galen's. "I present unto thee Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels, she who fought Sirrahon, the Stone Dragon, to save the Fey People."

A nervous stir ran through the crowd at my back at that pronouncement. It reminded me of the griffins' varied reactions to Belladonna's wild prophecies. My guess was that the rumors of smashed forests and giant scaly beasts vanishing into thin air were starting to circulate beyond the court.

Fitzwilliam raised a hand for silence. He studied me intently, and though I knew it was just for the ceremony, the back of my neck prickled up. I felt waves of heat rise from my skin. Between his gaze from the front and those from the crowd at my back, I'd never felt more pinned in place, more exposed and under scrutiny in my life.

Finally, the King spoke. "I have seen into thy heart, Dayna Chrissie of the Land of the Angels, and I find thee worthy. Kneel before me so that thou may receive ascension to thy Damehood."

I moved as if in slow-motion, and even then I almost fell to my knees. My legs shook as if they were made of soft rubber, but I managed to get into position. Fitzwilliam remained on the step above me. The window directly over his throne, complete with a stained glass depiction of a roaring dragon, allowed the sunlight to pour in. The King's blond hair shone halo-bright as I looked up at him.

A shadow made the light flicker as the King raised his right arm straight up over his head. For a second, I thought that I spotted Albess Thea descending from the high rafters of the room. She had done so back when Fitzwilliam had been coronated, flying down from on high to place the crown upon his head.

But instead of the Albess, a trio of owls fluttered down, holding an object between them in their talons. I felt a chill as I realized that they were quite a bit different from the ones I'd seen before. The owls that ran Parliament were mottled brown-black on their bodies and their feathered 'horns'. But these owls were the vivid color of butterscotch candy on their heads, horns, and backs, while their undersides were ivory-white.

The one in the middle bore a patch of dark brown feathers across its eyes and over its beak like a mask. The other two were simply huge, with wingspans that were almost double the size of the already large Parliamentarians. But all three had the flat, guileless eyes of predatory birds, without any of the warmth that shone through from, say, one of the griffins.

Instead of a crown, the three bore a sword. Wings flapping, they deposited the sword into the King's hand then flew back up into the ceiling's gloom. 'Oohs' and 'ahhs' came from the assembled crowd. I had to admit; it was an awesome bit of theatre.

Fitzwilliam brought the sword down and held it gently, handle resting in one hand, the flat side of the point in the other. Runes gleamed from deep inside the metal of the blade. He paused for a moment, and then spoke in a voice that rang through the entire room.

"I speak to thee now as monarch, Dayna of the Land of the Angels. If thou wouldst serve as Dame of this court, then thou must take the Oath of Fealty before all."

I nodded silently, bobbing my head as if it was on a string. This was so much like something out of a medieval epic, it just didn't feel real. And at the same time, it felt so crushingly real that I could hardly keep from trembling.

"Thou must promise to be ever faithful to thy lord," King Fitzwilliam began. "Thou shalt observe homage to him and thy knightly order above all others in good faith. Swear it now."

I swallowed, forcing spit down my parched throat, and croaked out, "I so swear."

"Thou must mete out justice, but give mercy unto him that asks for mercy, and defend those of weaker countenance with honor. Swear

it now."

"I so swear."

"Thou must observe all laws of the nobility, respect those who rightfully bear their coat of arms and sigils, and join in fasts, feasts, and offerings of the court. Swear it now."

"I so swear."

"And finally: if thou must place thy fortune, thy demesnes, or thy body in harm's way to protect thy lord or to prosecute his cause in war or peace, thou must do so dutifully and without hesitation. Swear it now."

My heart beat hard enough that my ears felt as if to burst. "I so swear!"

"Then I, King Fitzwilliam, son of the Good King Benedict and line of Julian the Conqueror, shall do my duty as ruler of Andeluvia!"

With that, the King changed the grip on his weapon. I expected him to give me a pair of light taps between the shoulder and the neck, the way Hollywood portrayed it. Instead, he struck each shoulder hard with the flat side of the sword, sending jolts of pain down the sides of my body.

Fitzwilliam's voice rose to a booming roar.

"*I dub thee DAME CHRISSIE!"*

And for the grand finale, the King gave me a *whack* along the side of my head that nearly knocked me over. I didn't just see stars. I witnessed entire planetary clusters bursting before my eyes. The crowd erupted in applause and cheers.

I felt Fitzwilliam's hand on one of my bruised shoulders, steadying me. I didn't know who to thank at the moment – him, or Lady Behnaz for giving me the pair of ankle-high booties. If I'd stuck with my high heels, then I would have been sprawled out on the floor like a party girl who'd taken one too many shots of tequila.

I was still blinking back tears of joy and pain as the King gently raised me to my feet and turned me to face the crowd. Well, there was one benefit of the headache that was starting to blossom behind my temples – I didn't care so much about being on display anymore. Though I'd have happily cut the ceremony short for a couple of extra-

strength aspirin.

And then something occurred to me.

I'd put my butt on the line for the kingdom more than once now. I'd tried to help my friends as best I could, and at times it had felt incredibly frustrating. But now…it felt good, damned good, to be recognized for my efforts. King Fitzwilliam hadn't put me through the Human Resources Department wringer. He hadn't asked to see my resume, have me fill out application forms in triplicate, or told me to pee in a cup so that I could be tested for whatever substance I might have smoked back in college.

He just recognized my abilities. He recognized, and appreciated, what I had done for him and his father.

Given the way my luck ran, I'd probably regret it later.

But for this one shining moment, I rather liked the way that Andeluvia handled things.

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Chapter Seven

I was Dame Chrissie now.

Dame Chrissie.

Mentally, I took off the label and tried it on again, like I would if I put a sweater on backwards. No matter what I did, it still didn't feel like a comfortable fit. I sighed to myself. I suppose, just like with that theoretical sweater, I would learn to 'grow into it'.

At the King's gentle urging, I stood to the right of his throne. Fitzwilliam took his seat and, looking appropriately regal, nodded or otherwise indicated recognition to each of the lords and ladies that came up to bow, first before him, and then to me.

Naturally, the monarch had the easier job. I still hadn't mastered the version of the curtsey used in this world, and besides, it just didn't feel appropriate for a knighting ceremony. So, when someone did their bow or curtsey before me, I bowed back.

This went fine for the first two dozen nobles and their retinues of the highest-ranked knights. When we'd gotten to the next dozen, I started to get a twinge in my lower back. By the time everyone had presented themselves before the throne, I was ready to quaff some Andeluvian ale and commiserate with Gorse about our aches and pains.

The whole 'You bow to me, I bow to you' thing had had its highlights as well. I'd spotted Grimshaw's dignified eagle head, a new scar prominent at the brow, looming over the crowd in the third row. He was the first in line to pay homage, and he was practically kittenish in his excitement.

"So proud I am to address thee as Dame Chrissie!" he said, in the middle of his bow. His lion's tail flicked back and forth like a golden switch as he did so. "Now, should we fall in battle, it shall always be as part of a *royal* mission. Thus our honor shall be *doubled*."

"You always manage to find the bright side," I said, as I made my own bow. In truth, nothing made me happier than to see him returning to his original 'oh, 'tis a marvelous time to perish gloriously'

attitude.

Other people kept their gloriously sour attitudes as well. Lord Behnaz bowed to me without comment, but he had an expression on his face as if he'd chugged a quart of spoiled milk and chased it down with a splash of castor oil. The young knight Sir Ivor couldn't match the sourness, but he made up for it with a sneer. As for his father, Lord Ivor? I'd gotten warmer looks from a cop who'd just pulled me over for speeding.

After the lords and ladies finally finished parading by the throne, the doors at the far end of the room were thrown open. The invited commoners exited noisily to the palace's outer courtyards. Just as with Fitzwilliam's coronation, the royal stewards had seen fit to throw a banquet with stations providing food and drink throughout the palace grounds. Around half the trumpeters swapped out their horns for other instruments and struck up a merry tune.

I still lacked the ear for my adopted world's music. The melody played by the royal band was probably part of the Andeluvian Hit Parade, but to me it sounded like a bunch of people using out of tune bagpipes to butcher the *Beer Barrel Polka*.

The sound of someone clearing their throat knocked me out of my reverie. To my surprise, it had come from King Fitzwilliam. Now that even the nobility had dispersed to enjoy the music and fine repast, we were left attended only by a pair of royal pages.

He pointed at the pair. "Precede me," he ordered.

The two young boys left hurriedly. The King sat back in his throne, looking at up me curiously for a moment before he spoke again.

"A crown for your notions."

I'd heard both the King and Galen the centaur use this turn of phrase, which referred to the standard gold coin used for payment throughout the realm. The best I could figure, it meant 'a penny for your thoughts'. I took a deep breath. There didn't seem to be anything I could say of consequence after all the high ceremony I'd just been through.

"I don't know that I have any notions in my head right now, your

Majesty," I said honestly. "Except…well, thank you. For all of this."

"You need not thank me," Fitzwilliam pronounced, with a dismissive wave of the hand. "There are many reasons I wished you raised above the salt. Some noble, some perhaps less so, but just as important."

"Ah," I replied cleverly. "Those reasons being?"

Fitzwilliam's lips twitched into his uniquely catlike grin. "Wheels run within wheels, Dame Chrissie. I shall reveal more to you in time. And since we are speaking of wheels, I would like you to see about jamming yourself into one particular set of spokes for me."

Oh boy, I found myself thinking. *What was that I just swore? Something about putting my body in harm's way without hesitation?*

Aloud, I said: "Of course, Sire."

"A knight or dame who has been newly dubbed is expected to see and be seen at the following banquet, should they be fortunate to have one. Most do not."

"They don't?"

"Many are knighted upon the field of battle, or immediately after the bloody contest is concluded. I suppose that it might be possible to hold a feast of some sort amidst the devastation and piles of the dead, but I think it would be in bad form."

"No doubt, your Majesty."

"But that is neither fish nor fowl to the matter at hand. I take it you noticed our new representatives from Parliament?"

I nodded. "They looked…formidable."

"Well said. I would wager a sizable purse that they are too 'formidable' for the task of tax legislation. I don't like or trust it one bit."

"Neither do I. Who are they? A new species of owl?"

"Not that I can tell. Their coloration is more in line with Albess Thea's, though not their military bearing. The two big ones are named 'Nix' and 'Nox'. They are male, or at least sound as such to my ear. And the one with the mask-like markings is called 'Raisah'. She is currently running Parliament in Thea's unfortunate absence. And she claims to be the new leader of the owls' Holy Order of the Sepulcher."

I rolled that one around my head for a moment. Frankly, this Holy Order didn't sound particularly warm and fuzzy. I shook my head before I found my voice again.

"Sire, surely the Albess wouldn't appoint these owls if she had–"

"You strike in the gold. The *Albess* wouldn't. And the Albess has been 'indisposed' and unavailable for me to visit for much too long."

That sent a little dagger of ice into my chest. I'd thought that the Parliamentarians were being particularly pissy with me by playing 'keep away' with the Albess. But if they were denying access to the King himself? Whatever they were up to had to be serious.

"What is it you wish me to do to, Sire?" I asked.

Fitzwilliam got up from the throne. "When you are done mingling with the nobles, I want you to introduce yourself to Raisah and her twin guardians. I want you to begin by asking her a little about the Albess' extended disappearance from my court."

"And then?"

The catlike grin appeared on his face again. "Why, just do what seems to come naturally to you, Dame Chrissie."

With that, Fitzwilliam made his way down from the royal platform and rejoined his pages, standing at attention by the far set of doors. I remained where I stood, dull aches radiating from the side of my skull, each shoulder, and the lower lumbar region of my spine. Maybe I'd taken that blow to the head too hard, as it took me a moment to figure out what I had to do.

What came naturally to me, so naturally that Fitzwilliam seemed to view it as a kind of weapon?

It came to me so suddenly that I had to suppress a snort of mirth. What Dayna Chrissie had been good at from Day One in this world was a single thing.

I was very good at digging out the truth of the matter at hand.

Yeah, that's one half of it, my brain said, with a mental shake of the finger.

That was true. Looked at another way, I had a different gift.

I was very good at getting under people's skins, no matter if they had armor, hooves, or feathers on top of it.

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Chapter Eight

I'd been to more than a few parties before, especially in college. There were times I got to be the flirty one with the guys. Other times I was the 'responsible' one who held the keys so that other people could get smashed. This time was different, though. This time I just hoped that no one would think I was an insufferable snob.

I wandered through the palace halls and outside on the green, doing my best to look noble. Mostly that involved my nodding at people as I walked by with a confident-yet-serene look on my face. Getting into random conversations wasn't a problem, however. Anyone dressed remotely like one of the nobles broke eye contact with me as soon as possible. And anyone dressed like someone outside the nobility never made eye contact with me at all. They just stopped their conversation and inclined their heads towards me until I moved on.

Socially, this 'Dame' thing was proving trickier than I'd thought it would be.

While the Andeluvians didn't go in for the strict class separation that one might have found, say, in my own world's Middle Ages, they didn't exactly rub elbows. As with the coronation, I found that mixing was very limited. The tables lining the palace halls had been piled high with roast meats, fine wine, and pastries. Somehow, they were marked for the upper classes only.

Outside, the well-to-do common folk quaffed beer while making do with sausages and grilled vegetables. They raucously cheered as performers juggled the odd set of flaming torches and mummers in bright red masks did a mixture of mime and dance. I wasn't sure that the music was much better. But at least the blatting of the horns mixed with the twang of lutes and the *tap-tom-tap* of drums that the musicians wore mounted in shoulder slings.

I walked past the rose gardens and then turned the corner of one of the palace's wings until I spotted the Parliament building. As I'd guessed, the three owls that had dropped the sword Fitzwilliam used to rap me on the head waited there. They perched atop a T-shaped

iron bar set into the turf, looking imperiously aloof as they scanned the rest of the partygoers. I'd taken only a few steps in their direction before I heard Liam's voice call out to me.

"Pardon, Dame Chrissie." Both Liam and Shaw came up to bow deeply before me. "We have been seeking your company."

"Or at least thy greetings, if thou hast business elsewhere," Shaw added. "Far be it from us to impose upon a Dame's errands of the day."

Galen quickly trotted over, his freshly polished hooves throwing up the occasional clod of turf. "I too wish to extend my congratulations, if by chance it is acceptable to you, Dame Chrissie."

I rolled my eyes. "Come on. Enough with the 'Dame' nonsense. Among us, I'll always be Dayna, okay?"

"See?" Liam canted his head in Galen's direction. "I told you what she would say, Wizard."

"Perhaps," Galen admitted. "Yet it is irregular, to say the least."

"Dayna honored one such as I with her name," Shaw put in. "I for one knew that she would ne'er stand on ceremony with us."

"I knew you wouldn't doubt me," I said, as I reached out and stroked Shaw's white-plumed head. "But while I'd like to stay and chat, the King has tasked me with using my talents on one of the parties out here."

"Most interesting," Galen observed. "Considering that there are no fresh corpses lying about for examination, I must assume that he wants you to upend someone's tea."

"Or strip the bark from their favorite tree," Liam added.

"Aye," Shaw agreed. "Fitzwilliam wants someone's feathers thoroughly ruffled."

"Okay guys, I get it," I said, though without heat. "Fitzwilliam wants me to stir the pot a little. Specifically, he wants me to talk to Raisah, the owl that leads the Holy Order of the Sepulcher."

Galen frowned and crossed his arms, evidently thinking about what to say.

Shaw shook his head. "Knowest I little of the owls, save that they are difficult to understand. The Albess was the only one that seemed

hale of mind, if not body."

"And she has been missing," Liam said, picking up on the thread. "We of the Fey deal with the owls now more than the griffins. As the Protector, I have tried to strengthen the links between us, for the Parliamentarians regularly visit our new home. They reputedly roost to the north and east of us. I have been rebuffed each time, though gently."

I nodded, taking in the information. Liam had led the fayleene people across the northern reaches of Fitzwilliam's kingdom to establish a sort of realm-in-exile within the Grove of the Willows. The forest containing the grove was one of Thea's favorite spots, and I'd seen whole flocks of owls within its boundaries.

"I too have endeavored to find Thea's whereabouts," Galen said, though he couched his words as if unsure of what to say next. "Alas, like Grimshaw, I found the owls singularly opaque. And the ones that Fitzwilliam wishes you to converse with…disturb me."

That got my attention. Liam and Shaw's too, for that matter.

"Explain, Wizard," Liam encouraged.

"The owls, as we call them, refer to their own people as the *Hoohan*. Raisah and her two companions are as such, but they are also members of the *Noctua*, which is a religious sect of some kind within the Hoohan. Outside of the owl community itself, the Noctua are usually the first to render aid to human communities in distress. The order does its best to recruit the strongest, longest-distance fliers."

"That doesn't sound like a bad thing," I commented.

"Nay, it is not," Shaw agreed. "Yet when I hear of such 'recruitment', 'tis also a way to pick the best avian warriors in a flock."

I considered. "Galen, you did say 'outside' of the owl community. What about inside of it?"

"I have observed that when in the presence of a member of the Noctua, other owls immediately go silent. Or at the very least, they become highly deferential."

Interesting, I thought. *The Noctua sounded like a form of owl aristocracy. Or secret police.*

“That’s all helpful,” I acknowledged. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve got to see if I can rattle the cages a little. I want to find out more about where the Albess is too. We’ll see if these Noctua plead ignorance as to Thea’s location.”

“I doubt that they can effectively dissemble on that subject,” Galen observed wryly. “After all, the anointed leader of their Holy Order of the Sepulcher is supposed to be Albess Thea herself.”

Now that Galen’s information had my insides in a thorough jumble, I set off to where the owls perched atop their metal T-bar. I approached them, stood a few respectful paces away, and then waited patiently.

As I expected, the owls completely ignored me.

“Greetings and thanks to you,” I began, trying a friendly tone on for size. “For your participation in my investiture.”

That got me exactly nowhere. The giant birds remained in place, staring passively over my head. The Parliamentarians most closely resembled the Great Horned Owls I’d glimpsed on occasion as a girl in Pike County, Illinois. That is, if the ones back home had gotten access to smart pills and a truckload of growth hormone. Thea and her helpmates were close to three feet tall. But these birds were half again as large. They were fully armed raptors the size of Emperor Penguins. A shiver went through me as I looked more closely at their talons. Each grasping foot was larger than a human hand, and these owls wore armor pieces that wrapped each extremity in cunningly wrought bronze, their forward-facing sets of talons tipped in scalpel-sharp steel tips.

I couldn’t let that intimidate me. Maybe I was so newly dubbed that I probably had a ‘new car’ scent about my ears, but I’d be damned if I would fail the King’s first assignment.

“Well now,” I tried again, trying to think of a new angle that the owls would understand, given their strange mode of speech. “It must be difficult for one used to the night to be abroad by day. Curious, how it must stunt one’s sight. And intelligence.”

This time, at least one of the bigger owls, Nix or Nox, acknowledged me with a flick of his eyes. Then the center owl, the

one with a raccoon-like mask, slowly turned to one side. Her short, hooked beak opened and she let out a single griffin-like *caw*.

Another owl came fluttering up as fast as her wings could take her. She settled onto a lower T-bar that had been placed nearby and bobbed her head, eyes flicking back and forth, taking in the situation before she spoke. Her gentle voice was one that I'd choose for a child's nanny. It helped me recognize her as Xandra, the first Parliamentarian I'd met at the start of my journeys in Andeluvia.

"So sudden, so sudden!" Xandra said worriedly. "One does not realize that one must ask for an audience with those of the Holy Order. Those whose lives are spent not in idle chatter, but in deep contemplation of the divine. Conversation must be channeled, it must not flow loose like a river that has broken its banks."

My brain didn't even bother translating all of that. "No disrespect meant, Xandra," I said. "But really, let's cut to the chase. One gets tired – and by 'one' I mean *me* – being put off by you folks."

"Oh my, oh my–" Xandra flapped her wings in distress. Her eyes darted between my face and those of her superiors.

"I'm no longer just an 'outworlder' that you can put off," I stated firmly. "I'm a member of the King's court, and I request – no, I demand one of two things. Either you give me an audience with the Albess, or you tell me what's happened to her. Right. Now."

"Oh my…" Xandra squeaked one final time.

With a *clack* of shifting metal-clad talons, Raisah finally turned her gaze on me. It was unnerving in an entirely different way than the griffin High Elder's examination. Belladonna was all paranoia and hot emotion, served up with a heaping side of ego. This raptor's voice was as cool as a tub of frozen nitrogen.

"One should know better than to ask for gifts from beyond one's friends and family," Raisah said, in a tone that contained equal parts annoyance and dismissal. "One would think that the parents of such an offspring would teach it not to play in front of the bear's den."

In other words: *Listen up, kid. Be quiet and stop poking the bear before it bites you.*

Well, my mom had tried to teach me, but I'd always been a slow

student when it came to letting well enough alone.

"If one's parents are wise," I shot back, "They teach offspring to learn. To examine. To uncover truth if it is hidden away from them and expose it to all."

I didn't know that owls could frown, but this one did. "Does one truly know what shall happen? What price can be paid for lack of wisdom when silence would be best?"

"One cannot pay, if there is no price. One need not worry about the bear if it is old, if it is toothless, if it is all growl and no bite."

The owl to Raisah's right leaned forward. I noticed a tiny O-shaped splotch of black feathers beside one of the bird's eyes as he spoke in an equally chill voice. "Release this one, Anointed. For this one's battle talons are well forged, and have spent too long in idleness."

Now the owl to Raisah's left moved as well, mimicking his companion's stance. Together they looked like a pair of butterscotch-colored gargoyles come to life. This one had no black mark on his face, but the eyes and voice were just as cold. "Nay, release one who truly wishes to taste blood. A beak such as this cannot but thirst for the sweet ebb of life into one's maw."

"Alas!" Raisah said, in a tone that badly mimicked regret. "Shedding blood here is ill-advised. And unnecessary."

"Anointed one–"

"Nix, one's thirst may not be slaked yet." The owl to the left shifted position back to ramrod straight on his perch. "Nox, one's talons must remain idle a little longer as well. But not too much longer, one suspects."

The owl to the right didn't look happy about things, but he also leaned back.

"One can hide the Albess," I gritted. "But not forever. Forests can be searched, stones can be flipped over, and even caves can be turned inside-out."

"One cannot search if one lacks eyes. Or hands," Raisah said ominously. Her voice swelled as she added, "Those who ladle out idle concerns may yet run into the harsh blade of reality. Witness the pair

of Noctua one gazes upon here. They are trackers who miss no trace! Hunters who know no fear! Warriors that feel no pain! Invincible to all who oppose–"

That was my cue to cut in.

"Then why do you have *two* of them?" I asked.

Raisah puffed herself up, annoyed that I'd stopped her in mid-rant.

"What?"

"I said, why do you have two of them?" I nodded at the one with the face mark. "Nox here looks like a sturdy enough fellow, if not too bright. And Nix must be what, the scrawnier, slower younger brother you let tag along?"

"You cannot…that is…"

"Look, if *one* is invincible, then why keep *both* of them around? Maybe they need a partner to play checkers with when things get slow? Do they provide each other company? So they can have someone to welcome them home and nest together to keep warm on a winter night?"

That did it.

The shrill sounds of a tea kettle boiling over erupted from a triple set of beaks. Then the three raptors began to swell ominously, like poisoned helium balloons. Each owl raised their wings over their backs like a large fan and spread their tail feathers.

Beaks clacked. Four-toed talons flexed and the birds shifted position to take off. In the space of two wingbeats, they could tear my flesh and sate their thirst on my blood.

It looked like the bear I'd baited was going to be both growl *and* bite.

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Chapter Nine

A blast of wind came from above and behind me, tossing my hair in front of my face for a heart-stopping second. Shaw's leonine growl cut into and then overrode the hisses of Raisah and her two owl goons. That was joined a second later by two sets of hoof beats. The glow of magic from antler and wizard staff pulsed on either side of my vision.

"You're not the only one whose friends thirst for blood," I said evenly. "Nor are your friends the only ones who have talons that ache to be used in battle."

Raisah's eyes burned like hot coals at me, but she brought her wings forward and deflated her tail and body feathers. Her voice was curt, and it hadn't lost an ounce of the iciness I'd first heard in it.

"No blood shall be shed. For now. But mark this one's words: this shall be remembered, and paid back in full."

She let out a raucous caw. With a flurry of silent wingbeats, she and her bodyguards took to the air. Xandra threw me a fearful look before hurriedly flapping off in their wake.

Galen took a step forward, his palms aglow with magical energy. As if only noticing that he'd been ready to cast a devastating spell, he looked at his hands, blinked, and muttered a single word. The glow went out.

"That was quite the merry message Raisah left with you," he observed, as Shaw broke his hover and landed next to him with a *thump*. "By chance, did this fulfill your obligation to King Fitzwilliam?"

"I'd hope so," Liam put in, as he too extinguished the magical glow that lit up his antlers like multicolored Christmas lights. "Otherwise, this course of action strikes me as more than a little dangerous."

"Liam has a point there," I admitted. "I don't think I'd have pushed so hard without knowing that you three had my back. I think I found what Fitzwilliam wanted to know. I found out that the owls are

willing to push back as hard as necessary to keep Thea in seclusion."

"I agree with thee upon all but the fayleene's point," Shaw scoffed. "Why shouldst thou think this is a hazardous duty? Surely, the three of us might well dispose of a few owls without raising a sweat!"

"I for one do not feel the matter is incontestable," Galen cautioned. "The Noctua have quite a reputation."

"Hah! I have served in the Air Cavalry nigh on thirty years, and never have I seen an owl raise a weapon heavier than an ink quill."

"That's because they do not openly display their skill," Liam said darkly. "The Hoohan keep that part of their society well hidden."

"Hold up," I said. "What do you mean?"

"Since becoming Protector, I hear and see more." Liam's deer face took on a worried cast. "I get…flashes, impressions of many of the creatures that live in the forest that encompasses the Grove of the Willows."

I nodded. This unexpected magical bonus had served us well in the past. Liam could give and receive general orders or warnings from creatures in the woods that made up the original fayleene homeland. I gave him a little verbal nudge to go on.

"What were these flashes?"

"Just quick images, shadows. Of large numbers of owls – numbers greater than those of the griffins – flying in formation high above the forest. The sound of metallic *clinks*, as of armored plate."

I thought of the foot armor that I'd seen the three Noctua wear. That didn't make me feel a lot better. Liam continued.

"I get flashes of death, always quick, always from above. A great deal of blood. And always at night."

"If they are performing kills within your demesne, you have cause to complain to them," Galen pointed out.

"Not necessarily," Liam said, with a shake of his antlers. "The owls have always had privileges to hunt within that forest, a claim that predates my own people's residence. And the Hoohan are not killing indiscriminately. Rather, they are keeping in check the rodents and other species that eat my kind's food. Taken as a whole, their skills are actually benefiting my people."

For now, I thought, in a strange echo of what Raisah had said earlier.

Aloud, I said: "I need to report this to the King."

"Dost thou wish us to accompany thee?" Shaw inquired.

"No, I can handle Fitzwilliam on my own. And besides, I got the impression that he wants to keep whatever he's asking me to do private." I thought for a moment. "But there is something I need to talk about with all of you. Something that just got a whole lot more urgent after that exchange with Raisah."

"We are at your service, as always," Galen said gallantly, and Liam nodded agreement. "As our resident griffin warrior has surmised, it is more important than ever that we work in concert from now on."

"Then let's meet at our usual place, the room in the corner tower." I glanced up and saw how quickly the late afternoon sun was descending towards the horizon. "Call it an hour and change, maybe. When evening falls."

"We shall be there," the Wizard promised.

With that settled, I began working my way back through the palace grounds towards where I'd last left King Fitzwilliam. It was slower going than I expected. Though I picked up my own pace, people still stopped what they were doing when I went by. They would turn and bow, or at least incline their head to me.

It seemed rude to not return that, so I ended up head-bobbing my way back to the throne room's antechamber. Instead of the usual pair of guards, a single page remained at the door, alternately stirring his mug of ale with a spoon and taking a judicious gulp of the beverage.

He snapped to attention as quickly as he could as I came up to him. He gulped, bowed, and said, "At your service, Dame–"

"Yes, yes, thank you, and you're welcome," I said hurriedly. "I'm looking for King Fitzwilliam. He left here a while ago, accompanied by four of your co-workers. Any idea where he might be?"

"His Majesty was out greeting commoners on the west green, then visiting with the assembled knights and lords in the Great Hall," the page recited, his face scrunching as he did his best to remember. "He claimed fatigue from the day's proceedings and excused himself. Since

it is early, and he has not summoned us to bring him anything since nuncheon, he must be in his private library."

"That's good enough for me," I said, and I took a half step before I realized that I had no idea how to get there. "And…where is that library, exactly?"

"I can guide you, Dame Chrissie."

"I appreciate the gesture, but no. I may need to consult with the King in private."

"Oh. Ah, you'll want to turn left at the outside corridor. Then a left at the third oak door. That shall take you to the Great Hall. Pass through that and walk straight-on through the hall with the banners of the Knight's Orders until you come to a staircase leading up to the turret. One flight up and you should see it."

"Right," I said, and I mentally fixed the directions in my mind.

I turned left as indicated, counted my way past two oak doors, and then made another left. The *pat-pat* of my leather boots on flagstone were soon drowned out by the sounds of drinking and merrymaking. The somewhat homey slate-and-soot bouquet of the palace gave way to the boozy smell of spilled wine.

And then I heard my name spoken, followed by the sound of people laughing.

Before I even thought about it, my fists clenched. I picked up my pace, though I sternly reminded myself to remain in control. In the back of my mind I recalled how, at the start, I was more than ready to let this world plunge into war, for all I cared. But now? I had friends here. I'd sacrificed to save this kingdom. And there was a ruler who'd stuck his neck out to raise me to a high, supposedly respected rank.

I wanted to see what was so damned funny.

The Great Hall's doors had been thrown wide open. I stepped into the glow cast by extravagant torchlight, and abruptly realized where I was standing. I recognized this narrow, high-ceilinged room, from its brilliant tapestries to its fleur-de-lis marked chairs. This was the very room where I'd first met the Andeluvian nobility. There were a couple of small differences between that time and now. For example, there had been a table there at the time, one chaired by Magnus Killsheven

in his guise as Duke Kajari. And I'd had Galen the Court Wizard at my side.

What hadn't changed a jot? The fact that I was still getting figuratively spat upon.

The room was filled with many of the nobles that had been bowing to me less than an hour ago. I didn't see Lady or Lord Behnaz, but I did spot several other nobles and knights I recognized. The grim-looking Lord Ivor skulked along the back wall. His son, the strapping knight Sir Ivor, stood with his back to me, his chain mail gleaming and half-drunk goblet of wine in hand.

Two other knights, whose goblets of wine were empty, stood in the center of the room, commanding the crowd's attention. They'd probably drank most of their wine, based on how they staggered about on their feet, and their doublets were stained reddish-purple. The taller of the two let out a foully fermented belch before he spoke.

"You might say that, Sir Varad, but I must caution you! The wench from another world might yet be the favored one of our lord and King!"

The shorter one named 'Varad' let out a boozy snigger. "Favored only because she has some witchy magic between her legs!" The knight's audience thought this was hysterical. He got roars of laughter in response from both the men and women. And of course, that egged the idiot on even further. "He says that she gave service to our kingdom? I'd rather she serviced my nether parts like a stoat in heat!"

He dropped his goblet. Then he set his hands down by his hips, as if he were grasping a woman's buttocks. He grunted lustily as he thrust his hips. This time, the roars of laughter echoed from the rafters.

To everyone's credit, the laughter died down as soon as people began noticing that I'd entered the room. Varad's buddy took one look at my face and quickly disappeared into the crowd. As for Varad, he kept on air-thrusting until he noticed how things had gone quiet. He turned, saw me, and blinked stupidly.

"Was there anything you wanted to say to me directly, Sir Varad?" I asked coldly.

A myriad of emotions flitted across the man's broad face. They ranged from a surprised 'oh, crap!' to a sulky 'how dare you spoil my fun'. Something close to the latter won out. Varad's voice took on a tone of indignant arrogance.

"What of it?" he asked, as stray droplets of wine dripped from his straggly blond beard. "Just because you have been named a 'Dame' by the lusty urges of our wet-at-the-ears King, you think you merit respect from any of us here?"

My face went flaming hot. I didn't mean to get into a pissing contest within the first couple of hours of my investiture. But if I backed down now, I knew – I just *knew* – that I'd never hear the end of the whispers and jokes about the 'trollop' who beguiled the King.

If I wasn't taken seriously, then I could see what would happen. I'd lose the best bulwark against the dark forces that were moving behind the scenes. The same mysterious 'him' that goaded Hollyhock to destruction would roll over this kingdom like a surge tide.

What could I do? My mind flashed, focusing laser-like on the guidance that Lady Behnaz had given me right before I'd left for the throne room.

Suddenly, with one of my brain's trademark *clicks*, I knew exactly what to do.

I lacked the build to snatch up a broadsword and give this idiot a permanent headache.

But I knew someone who did.

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Chapter Ten

"Sir Ivor," I stated. "Put that wine down and come to my side."

"What?" Ivor asked with a snort.

"I speak as Dame Chrissie," I said imperiously. "I speak as one directly raised to my station by your King. And I order you to put your wine down and come to my side. *Now*."

I didn't exactly like Sir Ivor. The first time I'd met him, he'd proven to be prejudiced against centaurs and dismissive of me. The second time, he'd been busy trying to convince Fitzwilliam that I was unfit for the court. But despite these sterling qualities, he did have the exact grizzly bear build to deliver a chop that would take a man's head clean off.

For his part, Ivor gave me a quizzical look. Like most knights I'd met at the palace, he wore his chain mail and his weaponry pretty much round the clock. But he also wore a surcoat over his mail, one that bore the half-moon sign of his house. He knew the rules as well, if not better than I. But to his credit, he gave a tiny shrug as if to say, "All right, I'm curious where this will lead." He put his goblet down on a nearby table and stood next to me, facing Sir Varad.

"I am here, Dame Chrissie," he said simply.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Sir Varad asked with a quaver in his voice.

"Sir Ivor," I commanded. "Draw your sword!"

Ivor's weapon came out of its scabbard with a slithery sound. Varad's eyes went wide as he noticed that the knight outweighed and outclassed him by at least forty pounds of pure muscle.

The rest of the room had gone dead quiet.

"Sir Ivor!" I shouted. "Hold your weapon at the ready and advance upon Sir Varad!"

Ivor shifted the grip on his weapon so he was positioned to deliver either a massive thrust or limb-rending slash. Then the massive knight stepped towards the center of the room, his mail clinking loudly in the silence. People on Varad's side of the room began to scramble away in

a panic.

Varad's eyes glazed over in terror as he realized that he was all alone. He backed up a step, but in his drunken haze he tripped over the goblet he'd dropped. He landed butt first on the stone floor with a grunt, whimpering as he tried unsuccessfully to get to his feet, and a cry erupted from his lips.

"Mercy, Dame Chrissie! I yield!"

"Halt, and remain where you are, Sir Ivor," I said, and the knight did so. To Varad, I added, "Stay out of my sight for the remainder of the day. Should I hear you defaming me again, I shall not consider that you have yielded until your guts are on the floor."

Varad nodded. Scrambling drunkenly to his feet, he lurched his way out of the room. I looked around at the rest of the guests who remained frozen where they stood. My mind flashed back to my performance in front of the High Elder at the Aerie. Once I was in, I had to finish what I'd started.

"If anyone *else* would like to comment on my investiture," I gritted, "Now's the time. Because your friend Varad just used up the last of any mercy I plan to show."

No one took me up on the offer.

Sir Ivor lowered his sword, his hard eyes gazing around the room. People began murmuring to each other, leaving the room as quickly as they could, scrupulously avoiding my gaze. I moved to his side as he deftly sheathed his weapon.

"You certainly have given our nobles something to talk about for the next week, Dame Chrissie," he said wryly. "I am not fond of you, but I will admit to some satisfaction. Varad's a pig. A drunkard of a knight who deserves to be pickled in his own juices."

"You may not be fond of me," I agreed. "The feeling is mutual. You still have my thanks."

"It was lucky that things did not progress further. As an outworlder, you didn't realize that you cannot order me into battle."

"Yes, I'm an outworlder, yet I know your rules. I never intended for you to fight."

Sir Ivor gave a start. "But you ordered–"

“Not quite,” I pointed out. “I ordered you to come to my side. Then to draw your sword. And, finally, to advance with it at the ready.”

“But–”

“I never ordered you to *do* anything to Sir Varad, did I?”

The young knight tried to formulate an answer. His face grew red as he struggled to reply. Instead, a strangely whispery voice sounded next to us as the knight’s father, Lord Ivor, spoke in turn.

“That was clever, Dame Chrissie. Not diplomatic, perhaps, but clever.” The elder Ivor’s eyes looked at me piercingly, as if reappraising my value. “You have surprised both me and my son, which is a rare thing. For that you have my thanks.”

Lord Ivor gave me a curt nod, which I returned. Placing a pale hand on his son’s shoulder he guided him towards the exit. In a moment, I was alone in a room that smelled of spilt alcohol and rusty iron.

I counted myself blessed on the ‘alone’ bit. I found a goblet that no one had gotten around to fouling yet. I poured myself a serving and downed it in one gulp, then waited a full minute for my nerves to stop tap dancing under my skin.

Looking around I spotted a corridor at the far end of the Great Hall, one with walls draped in banners. With a sigh, I put down my drink before I was tempted to have a second, a third, and so on. Squaring my shoulders, I walked on towards my destination.

What a great figure I’m cutting on my first day as a Dame, I thought ruefully. *First the Noctua, and then this. Now everyone respects me, right?*

I passed by the swaths of cloth, only glancing at the multiple colors and stylized animals as I went by. I just wasn’t in the mood to appreciate the artwork right now. The hall led me to a wide spiral staircase that bent clockwise around a central stone pillar decorated with snakelike carvings. My steps echoed as I ascended the stairs.

One flight up the landing opened onto a high-ceilinged room flanked by a pair of stone shelves lined with massive leather bound tomes. A wool rug covered the floor. Intricately carved wooden furniture inlaid with glittering pieces of glass had been placed

strategically about the room. Spicy floral scents rose from the log smoldering in the nearby hearth.

I timidly rapped upon the stone by the entryway. “Your Majesty?”

“In here, Dame Chrissie,” came the reply. I took a few steps in, allowing my eyes to adjust to the light. King Fitzwilliam reclined in a chair draped in rich green fabric as he used the light from a nearby window to read one of the large books. “I take it that you have disturbed my repose because you have something to report?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” I said, as I made my way over to him. I paused for a moment and bowed slightly before him.

He grinned. “It is painfully obvious that our ways are new to you. But it is also obvious that you are working hard to make up the difference at the next tilt. That speaks well of your determination and character.”

“I am trying to uphold the trust you have placed in me by giving me this position,” I said respectfully.

“Indeed.” The King shot me a wry look. “Does that ‘upholding’ include threatening one of my knights with imminent decapitation at Sir Ivor’s hands?”

Ouch. Fitzwilliam had already heard about the incident with Ivor and Varad.

Just my rotten luck.

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Chapter Eleven

I stammered as I tried to explain what had happened, but Fitzwilliam waved me to silence.

"Be at ease. I am also aware that your discussion with the owls provoked them into an open display of arms. It seems that word of your deeds – or misdeeds – travel faster than a war-courser at full gallop."

"If you already know, then I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"On the contrary, there are things best spoken of in private." Fitzwilliam indicated the chair across from him. I took a seat as he set his book aside. "As far as I am concerned, about that incident with Varad? He is a landless knight, and living proof that there are too many men in Andeluvia without enough warring for their tastes. You upheld your office without bloodshed, and that is the best I can hope for, given the state of the kingdom."

"The state of the kingdom? I'm not sure what you mean, Sire."

"That is because you are new. Not to Andeluvia, necessarily, but as to how power and influence work in a kingdom like mine." He pursed his lips for a moment as he considered how to explain his thoughts. "I'm sure that you recall how I supported hiring you prior to your mission to the griffin aerie."

"I do, your Majesty."

I kept a poker face as I said the words. Fitzwilliam had initially supported the idea to make me the Court Forensics Examiner, but between the nobles of the court and the budget-blocking maneuvers of the owls, he'd been stymied.

"Haven't you ever wondered why I simply didn't overrule all objections to your appointment? It is well enough for a king to listen to all viewpoints, but I am under no obligation to follow any compass other than my own. For example, I could have told Lord Behnaz that I planned to ignore him and just appointed you to the post."

I thought about it a moment before answering.

"Sire, you once told me how useful Lord Behnaz is, and why you

had to free him from prison after I'd brought his past actions to light. I supposed that you were concerned he might be tempted once more into disloyalty. Or worse."

"Those concerns exist. Oh, Behnaz seems to be useful enough at keeping order in the Western Reaches. And he seems to be loyal enough, at present. But there's the word that gnaws at one's sleep in the wee hours. *Seems*."

"How is that, Sire?"

"Have you ever considered that, until recently, you have had more experience dealing with Lord Behnaz than I?"

I shook my head.

Fitzwilliam's eyes took on a faraway look. "When I was a boy, so young that I could barely even lift a sword, I was hostaged and brought up in a far land. That is, my life was given as security for the fulfillment of a treaty that my father, King Benedict, wanted very badly."

"I'm sorry to hear that, your Majesty."

"Oh, my life wasn't unpleasant. I was brought up as one of the ruler's own sons. I was treated well, and even given chances to learn how to govern effectively. But the fact remains that no one here knows me, and I in turn know none of them."

I remained quiet, trying to understand what Fitzwilliam was sharing. Not only were these the private thoughts of my new boss, but it was helping me learn the 'how' and 'why' behind his decision making.

"To prosper, a kingdom needs a strong ruler, backed by loyal vassals who are sworn to protect both land and crown. That comes before all else, which is why I can only push so far for what I want."

He sighed and went on. "My memories of my father were of a jolly, red-cheeked man with a taste for strong wine over wise statecraft. Certainly, he was beloved by the common people. Yet I can never forget that so many of the nobles here knew of his assassination. They knew, and decided that it was in their best interest to go along with a usurper who never even wanted the crown! *That* is how poorly my father ruled these nobles. All of them – Behnaz, Ivor, the lot – still

bridle at the touch of my royal authority. Which brings me back to you."

That surprised me. "I don't see how I relate to any of this."

"The nobles who claimed you were not worthy to attend my court were only one source of opposition. If you recall, the owls who run Parliament also refused to approve my budget if I tried to hire you."

"I still wonder why this carried such weight, Sire. Is the owl's approval of your budget really the key to running the kingdom?"

"Alas, it is, and it far predates my or my father's reign. It is not widely known, but the owls do more than write tax codes. They have also always run the office of the Exchequer. They are the ones who collect the taxes, hold the treasury under guard, and approve what I can disburse back to the lords of my kingdom. That in turn allows them to pay for everything outside of their immediate demesne – the upkeep on their roads, payment for the companies of knights-at-arms, and much more.

"In that case, I'm doubly thankful that you went to bat for me, your Majesty." At his puzzled look, I added, "That's an expression from my world. It means that you tried your hardest to support my cause. Even if the effort ultimately failed."

Fitzwilliam smiled. "Who said I failed?"

"But didn't they stop–"

"Consider what happens if I bow to the demands of the owls. I would lose face as surely as you would have, had you not stood up to Sir Varad. Therefore, I made my stance very clear just before you left for the Reykajar Aerie. Your mission was to prove that you were *fit for my court*, not to get the forensic examiner job I'd originally offered."

I finally understood the point of Fitzwilliam's machinations. By making me a Dame, he'd bypassed the owls' objections and brought me into his fold in a single action. I was so impressed by this, I almost missed his next question.

"So you are a Dame now, but one without lands. Do you plan to marry one of our eligible lords or knights to gain an estate? At least within the next fortnight?"

"What?" I gulped. "I mean, 'No!'. That is, 'no', your Majesty."

“As I thought. Alas, all the prime land is spoken for, but I’m sure I could allocate some rocky highlands two day’s ride to the south as your demesne.” He rubbed his chin as he considered. “You’ll also need peasants to work the land and pay you rents. I suppose I can find around fifty commoner’s families to put under your care. I would suggest that you start out simple, with farmers who know their trade with the poorer soils. You’ll need a couple of families with blacksmiths, a carpenter, perhaps a weaver or a tanner.”

I’d already had enough shocks to my system today, but this one threw me for yet another loop. It was nice to have the position of Dame, but I hadn’t planned on having to act as the landlord or general manager for fifty families. Yet again, I hadn’t thought things through all the way, and the medieval customs of Andeluvia were continuing to trip me up. And to top it off, if I had to manage land two day’s ride away and still attend court, that meant I’d be signing on for a commute that would make even the most hardened resident of Los Angeles wince!

“Might I offer a counterproposal, Sire?” I asked urgently. The King nodded, so I went on. “I really don’t have a lot of experience or interest in, ah, ruling over a bunch of people. If you want me to serve you in my capacity as a forensic investigator, it would be best if I remained on site. Here, at your palace.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You really wish to have no grounds, no estate of your own?”

“That is up to you, your Majesty, but if I may…I’d really appreciate it if you simply granted me a tower. There’s this one room I already use a lot.”

“Yes, the one with the corner turret. I’ve heard the pages discussing the exotic visitors you host there.” Fitzwilliam considered for a moment. “It will come with unique challenges, that much is sure. Is this really what you wish?”

“That’s what I wish, Sire.”

“Then I will craft a pronouncement making it so,” he stated, and I heard the unmistakable tone of dismissal creeping into the King’s voice. “While I do not expect you to attend all the gatherings of the

royal court, I want you here for the next couple of meetings. I will send the Lord Pursuivant to you tomorrow morning to brief you on your duties there and henceforth."

"I look forward to learning how your court works," I said humbly, as I got to my feet.

"Oh, it's not difficult. But you are a near constant topic as of late, and the nobles are restless. Your presence shall either assuage their concerns or draw the poison to the surface."

Well, that gave me the warm and fuzzies inside.

I cleared my throat as I asked, "If I may, Sire, why does my name keep coming up as a topic? My mission to the griffins is past."

"Your mission is in the past, yes. But your assertions continue to roil the court. And I must admit, I am holding on to my skepticism about these 'creatures of the dark' that you claim are on the move."

Fitzwilliam's admission floored me. The griffins could close their eyes, at least until recently. Yervan's disappearing dragon tracks could call Sirrahon's presence into question. But the King had witnessed the evil of the demonic Old Man of the Mountain, and had even helped me destroy it.

"You are skeptical? But why, your Majesty?"

King Fitzwilliam gave me a strange, melancholy look.

"Because I choose to view the sun as rising, not setting, Dame Chrissie. As I have just admitted to you, I do not yet command the love, fear, or respect of my most powerful lords. I have only their obedience, and even that is given grudgingly. At its core, this kingdom is perilously weak. If we are soon to be under siege by forces of the dark, then we shall surely fall."

"Sire…"

"If you truly love Andeluvia, then bring proof before my throne and my lords that there are things moving out beyond the shadows," he entreated me, as I moved to go. "Elsewise…enjoy your Damehood as you may. If you are right, there may not be much time left to do so."

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Chapter Twelve

On television, forensics offices are staffed by crime scene investigators who somehow always manage to be perfectly coiffed and made up. They get the luxury of working on one crime at a time for the duration of a fifty-minute show. And they all employ the absolute latest in huge, touch-sensitive digital displays to chart out witnesses, evidence, and their latest theories as to who was the guilty snake-in-the-grass.

Nobody mentions that those displays are pretty damned expensive for a publicly funded M.E.'s office to purchase. Since these departments pinch pennies until they squeal, I never got to work on a touch-screen. The best the OME in Los Angeles ever provided me was a cork board that looked as if it had been gnawed on by a group of teething chipmunks.

Here in Andeluvia, cork was something used to seal up bottles, not to hold pushpins. So I was down to using chalk on a big slate board. At least that was available in quantity. Galen's laboratory was a quarter of the way around the palace perimeter, but he'd had his slate boards pre-mounted on a wheeled frame so he could move them between his lab and his study. It was child's play – or centaur's play, to be precise – for him to wheel over a board from his section of the palace to my turret room.

I found to my delight that Galen's board was also height adjustable, with a series of slides and pegs that allowed us to lower it from centaur height to human height. When that chore was taken care of, Galen stood back and chatted idly with Liam and Shaw while I scratched out a series of lines and diagrams with a piece of chalk.

"The way the incident was conveyed to me, Dayna threatened to sever the man's testicles," the Wizard intoned, referring to my incident with Sir Varad. "It made quite the impression."

I was shocked, but I didn't let it show. Apparently, rumors involving 'Dame Chrissie' didn't move 'as fast as a galloping horse.' They moved at warp speed.

“Really?” Liam asked, surprised. “I heard that Dayna chopped off the knight’s manhood and tossed it out a window.”

That made my face flush. I forced myself to continue writing on the board, though it was becoming decidedly difficult to concentrate.

“Thou art delirious, fayleene!” Shaw broke in. “Thy sources are misinformed!”

“My ‘sources’, as you put it, are searching the palace’s rose garden as we speak for something to re-attach to Varad’s…stump.”

“‘Tis a ridiculous rumor,” Shaw insisted.

“Thanks, big guy,” I said gratefully.

“She doth know better,” Shaw continued. “A wound to one’s manhood ‘tis terrible indeed, but not uniformly fatal. Dayna t’would have maimed or gutted her opponent, in proper griffin fashion.”

“True, true,” Liam said, nodding.

“One cannot contest the point,” Galen agreed.

I put my head in my hands and let out a groan.

“Guys,” I said, “let’s not put too much stock in these rumors, okay? The fact is, I used Sir Ivor’s help to throw a scare into a drunk.”

“Alas, that is a far less interesting story,” Galen sighed. “I shall be sure to take pains to point out the correct sequence of events to any who ask or repeat the rumor.”

That made me pause for a moment. It occurred to me that, given my treatment at the palace since I’d first come here, a little speculative fear might go a long way. A very long, long way.

“Actually,” I said, after some re-considering, “let’s allow things to stand. I’m curious how they’re going to be interpreted by the fifth or sixth iteration.”

“Very well.”

“Now that we’re done with the sideshows,” I announced, “We need to discuss some of the things that we’ve been dealing with over the last couple of months. Does anyone have to be anywhere this evening?”

Shaw timidly raised his paw. “Nay, Dayna, but heavy thinking requires that both the mind and the stomach have something to gnaw upon.”

No sooner had the griffin mentioned food than my stomach growled an assenting ‘Aye!’ to that thought. Between breakfast and now, I’d had a single sip of wine. My stomach couldn’t have handled more, between my investiture, confronting the owls, confronting Sir Varad, and reporting to the King.

“Dinner is a great idea,” I said. “Galen, maybe you could ask one of the pages?”

“I could,” Galen considered. “But since you are now a member of the royal house, your request might carry more weight, therefore lending more speed.”

“I don’t know about that. I mean, the King did grant me this tower as my ‘estate’, but I–”

“He did?” The centaur looked pleased. “Not only are we practically neighbors, you definitely have household privileges.”

The Wizard trotted over to the doors, threw them open, and bellowed for one of the pages. To my surprise, one of the robin’s egg blue boys came at a run. He almost tripped over his shoes as he bowed to me.

“What is your wish, Dame Chrissie?” he asked timidly.

“I need dinner for myself and my three noble guests,” I ordered. “The royal kitchens should have something for a centaur and a human, but I want a trough of your best greens for the Protector of the Forest. And a large quantity of meat for a griffin from the Air Cavalry, and it doesn’t have to be cooked. Get it here fast, we’re starving and my griffin friend might just choose to eat you instead.”

The boy looked horrified and ran off.

Liam chuckled and said under his breath, “Welcome to my world.”

Galen shut the doors behind us as I went back to the board. At the very top I’d written ‘THE OLD WAR’ in all-capital letters. Below that, I’d drawn lines to several boxes: *MAGNUS, ROCKY, WYETH, SIRRAHON, ‘HIM’, PENDANT, CODEX, DESTRY, THEA, BELLADONNA*.

“Grimshaw,” I said tentatively. “We may need to mention the events connected with a specific reeve. If that will discomfort you, we can discuss it at another time.”

Shaw’s easy jocularity disappeared in an instant. “Dost thou worry

about causing me pain? I am a griffin, and the names thou refers to do not exist in mine own kind's history."

I nodded, my emotions a jumble inside as I did so. Liam and Galen looked grim, but they had nothing to add. Sighing, I turned and pointed to the words at the very top of the board.

"Right before we gave our report on the Reykajar Aerie, Shaw identified a pattern he saw in the major events since I've arrived in your world," I began. "Good King Benedict's murder nearly led to war between humans and centaurs. The death of Quinval, Liam's predecessor, was a precursor to the destruction of the Fayleene Woods. The goading and guidance of Hollyhock led to the near-annihilation of the griffin aerie. As Shaw himself put it: *There is a hand of darkness moving pieces on the board.* The resumption of this War is a goal. I believe each of these boxes represents a piece."

"Rekindling this Old War canst not be the end goal," Shaw objected. "War itself 'tis but the use of combat to force the decision of an issue."

"Yes, and that's just one of the things that has been bothering me." I jabbed a finger at the first couple of boxes. "We were lucky enough to take Rocky and Magnus off the board before they could do more harm. But Sirrahon and Wyeth worry me. They're both still out there."

"They are indeed," Liam muttered. "Both haunt my dreams. Yet that is all we have seen of them."

"Which means we can't monitor or locate them easily," I said. "And I'm completely at a loss about how to find the mysterious 'him' that Hollyhock mentioned. Before she died, Holly pressed a pendant into my palm. I still keep it, but I've asked Galen to examine it six ways from Sunday for clues, or any dirty tricks that might be hidden inside."

"Negative on both counts," Galen put in. "The pendant appears to be naught but a simple silver alloy."

"The Codex is an even bigger source of frustration for me. You all know that demons and dragons were stated as being part of the coalition that made up the losing side, the so-called 'Creatures of the

Dark'. And that the griffins and fayleene were part of the coalition of the 'Creatures of the Light'. There are several other peoples mentioned on both sides in there. But even with the texts I borrowed from Zeno, I haven't been able to translate any of the runes, save one: the *pouquelaye*. Destry's people were on the side of the Light, and I believe that his mind warping capabilities were either built-in or bred for."

"That would explain his people's distress over his inability to function at night," Galen said. "Those abilities are very potent. And very dangerous."

"Tell me about it. However, he's far too young to know much about the Old War, or any of the powers behind it. I suppose that we could try to contact Destry's dam. But the ethereals aren't too happy with me, since I couldn't figure out a way to cure him."

"I still would like to speak with him about his powers," Galen mused. "Have you seen him since the day at the beach?"

"Only once. The day after, he visited me in Los Angeles, where I told him of my suspicions. Since then…well, a couple of days ago I got a postcard from Tristan Da Cunha. That's a remote island in the South Atlantic, thousands of miles from where I live. All he said was that we were in his thoughts, he was doing fine, and that he was continuing to travel the world, observing and learning."

In a way, Destry's postcard raised yet more questions in my mind. Was he searching for his purpose in life beyond being a 'weapon', or something more? Who or what was he observing around the globe?

A knock at the door interrupted my impromptu lecture, but I was more than happy to see a group of pages bearing food enter, once Galen opened the door. They carefully kept out of Shaw's reach as they placed platters, silverware, and pitchers of drink on the table and floor.

Galen and I were brought a gigantic roast chicken to share between us, along with a platter of grilled turnips the size of baseballs, a tureen of fragrant greens in a cream sauce, and a bright yellow cake studded with golden slices of quince fruit.

Fitzwilliam's grocers must have had a run on poultry, as they brought an even larger pair of turkeys, both fire-blackened and

dripping juice. Shaw pounced on the birds, tearing into his food with such gusto that it made Liam tug his trencher of greens and fall berries a couple of paces away. I nudged his bowl of water over as well, then helped myself to a cup of the sweet white wine that accompanied most Andeluvian meals.

Conversation ground to a halt as I joined in the carnage. Flavor-wise, Andeluvian fare tasted a little basic to my palate. Food simply was 'meaty', 'salty' or 'sweet', but it did stick to your ribs, and on days like this, I had zero complaints.

Shaw, not surprisingly, finished first. Using his stout black beak, he crunched through the hollow bones of the poultry, devouring each bird in only a handful of bites. He sighed contentedly, waiting until I'd finished two separate servings of dinner and a slice of the cake to ask a question.

"Dayna, 'tis a marvelous thing, this board of yours. But all we have discussed…does it not simply tell us what we do not, nay, what we *cannot* know? T'would it be impertinent to ask what we can do against these forces of shadow?"

"It would be very pertinent," I said, as I looked back up at the names on the board. "I have an idea. And that's what I want to talk about next."

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Chapter Thirteen

I picked up my cup of wine and went back up to the board, tapping my finger on the next-to-last name on the board: *THEA*.

"Right now, I believe that Albess Thea may be the answer to the question of 'what do we do next' in our struggle. Which makes it even more interesting that the Noctua are pushing so hard to keep us from her."

"What makes you think that the Albess is the key piece in the design?" Liam asked.

"Because she has been pivotal in almost everything that has happened between all of us." I gestured towards Liam. "I'm almost certain that she was the one who told you, at the lowest point in your life, not to despair. That your life was precious and had meaning."

An amazed look crept onto Liam's deer face. "If so, I am in her debt."

"Then I am also indebted," Galen breathed. "I never thought on it before…but when I arrived to become the Court Wizard under Benedict, even the Good King could not shield me from the cruel invective and insults from those here who mistrust centaurs. I had decided to return home, to face the shame of my father and my family. But it was the Albess who convinced me to stay on."

"T'was the Albess that gave me the advice that led to the defeat of the Old Man of the Mountain," Shaw added.

"And it was the Albess who did two things for me," I said. "First, she was the one who gave me the clues to solve Benedict's murder. And second…she was the one who convinced Parliament to bring a forensic investigator to your world to begin with. In fact…"

I paused. Then my brain did one of its weird *clicks*.

"If there is a hand of darkness moving pieces on the board…" I breathed, "Then who's to say that there isn't a hand of light doing the same thing?"

"What do you mean, Dayna?" Liam asked.

"I mean…that I want Thea back. I think we *need* to get Thea

back." I tapped my chin with a finger as I looked up at the last name on my board. "Belladonna may have said as much."

"The High Elder?" Shaw sputtered. "But thou hast dealt with her, thou knowest that her thoughts stray to madness and lunacy!"

"Actually, I don't think she's mad. Yes, she's eccentric. And ridiculously paranoid. But I don't think she's a few peas short of a casserole anymore. When I spoke with her, after the battle in the Lair of the Elders? She sounded suspiciously sane to me."

"You think her insanity is an act?" Galen inquired. "A put-on for those who might usurp her authority?"

"I won't say it's all an act…but it might be the best she can do to cope with the signals different parts of her brain are sending her." I thought about how Belladonna kept her leonine fur scrupulously clean, but let her avian feathers go without preening. "I think that she's been driven half-mad by prophetic visions. Visions which are a hell of a lot more compelling than anything I've gotten from the soothsayer's guild."

My Wizard friend let out a horsey snort. "I doubt that we can find any guidance in the prophecies of a half-mad griffin reeve."

"Even if they are true," Liam argued, "Prophecy by nature is hard to pin down. It is said that by the time one understands it, it is far too late to fight it."

"But, dammit, that's what I want to do!" I said, and my voice came out harsher than I intended. At least I had my friends' attention on me now. "Look, I know that each of you have doubts. And in my world, prophecy has the same reputation. It's all a bunch of smoke and air, and you only understand that Person X was supposed to stab you right as you stand there with a knife hilt-deep in your chest."

"You don't believe that is the case here?"

"Not here, not anywhere! I've never believed in fate, or destiny, or whatever school of prophecy says that you simply can't affect the universe! Maybe it's my upbringing, maybe it's because I've put together too many puzzles in my life to let this one go by. But I can't sit back and be a passive participant in this world's demise. Too many people…"

I swallowed, hard. I thought of Captain Vazura for a split second. Then the last bloody tear that ran down Holly's face before Shaw ripped out her throat. My voice felt raw as I spoke again.

"Too many people have died because of the dark forces connected to the diagram on this board. Fitzwilliam thinks this kingdom is too brittle, too weak to take another effort to destabilize it. I'm no fan of Belladonna, but if her words are the only weapon we have, then *I damn well want to use them!*"

The room went quiet until Shaw spoke up. "I believe that hands of darkness and light hath been at work. Thou hast never steered me wrong, Dayna. I will support thee in this venture."

"As will we," Liam asserted. Galen nodded his agreement.

"Then the first thing we need to do is put down what Belladonna said to me about her visions, back when I first met her," I said. "I wish I could remember all of what she said."

Shaw made a leonine shrug. "My kind doth have near perfect recall. 'Tis most helpful when navigating on the wing over long distances."

So, he repeated back to me each phrase that the High Elder had spoken on that fateful day. I wrote down each statement on the board in its own separate row, and then stepped back to look at the results. I got a chill as I read the words. Belladonna's screechy voice echoed in my ears as I did so.

The war of eons past yet stirs.

The dream horses sow the seeds of their fall.

The humans dwell upon the bones of their nemesis.

The owls imprison the sacred as they move on silent wings, ready to strike.

The greatest of the dragons passes into realms beyond the sight of all.

Creatures of the fey and the rock scheme our destruction.

One who might yet save us lies beyond the light of the hearth.

"Mayhap I was mistaken in my first assessment," Galen admitted. "The first and fifth lines seem not to predict, but they state items that are not, as of yet, general knowledge. This 'eons past' conflict is definitely stirring, while Sirrahon has indeed 'passed beyond sight'."

“And the next line, the one about creatures of ‘the fey’ and ‘the rock’ devoted to our destruction is quite telling,” Liam mused. “Could she be referring to the mad fayleene princeling and the ancient stone dragon we fought?”

I nodded. “Yes. That must be a reference to both Wyeth and Sirrahon.”

Shaw shook his head. “The second line ‘tis still a jumble to me. Destry t’was only created recently by the pooka. If his kind have sown the seeds of their fall, does that mean he leads to their defeat or destruction?”

“It is a troubling assessment,” Galen agreed. “At least at first blush. Yet it could mean that the pouquelaye are working on something else that will cause them trouble. This line could presage that their banishing him leads to their downfall.”

“And the humans dwelling upon bones…” Liam shivered, making his antlers quiver. “I don’t like the sound of that. Or that whoever might save us lies beyond the hearth.”

“What do you think that last bit means?” I asked, indicating everyone in the room. “I was hoping that one of you might have insight into that.”

Galen cleared his throat before answering in his typical scholarly manner. “A ‘hearth’ is the floor space in front of a fireplace. If one wishes to wax metaphorical upon the matter, the ‘light of the hearth’ likely means the bounded area where one feels the warmth of the fire.”

“Then this means…someone from outside that boundary. Perhaps someone who is from a cold climate, or has been tucked away from warmth? Perhaps someone who doesn’t use the warmth of an indoor fire?”

“Should it be so, most griffins would qualify,” Shaw pointed out. “My kind do not need fire to keep warm on all but the coldest of nights, and even so, we do not build fires ‘indoors’.”

“The same goes for my people,” Liam added.

I let out a breath and ran my fingers through my hair. My well-intentioned plan to beat prophecy at its own game was rapidly

collapsing in on itself. There were too many phrases that either made no sense, or could be interpreted so many ways that it was useless to speculate.

Except for one piece.

I drew a line under Belladonna's fourth pronouncement: *The owls imprison the sacred as they move on silent wings, ready to strike.*

"What do the owls consider sacred?" I asked aloud.

"There are many things the Hoohan consider blessed or holy," Galen replied. His tail swished, startled, as he added, "But the most sacred…is their Albess. And they have been most unwilling to let us see her."

"Or to let her see us," I said. "As to the rest…owls always move on silent wings. It's how they operate as predators."

"Their movements near the Grove of the Willows," Liam observed, tapping his forehoof on the stone floor. "Could they be massing to strike somewhere? Here, even?"

Galen's face took on a grim cast. "If so, then I would urge each of us to be discrete with our speculations. The owls see and hear a great deal within these walls."

I nodded, and my expression was probably just as dark. "Say that our suspicions are correct. Then until we determine a way to bring the Albess back, the owls have effectively rendered us blind. We're going to have to move as quickly and quietly as they do, or they stay in their role as the predators. And we remain the prey."

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Chapter Fourteen

Another flash-bang of white light and ozone, and Galen's spell transported me back to my house. Half the time I ended up losing my footing and landing on my face or my butt. This time, I split the difference by wobbling so badly that I fell to my knees.

At least it didn't hurt. I'd installed a plush Persian rug in my living room, and in a fit of inspiration I'd purchased one with a red-and-white bullseye pattern. I closed my eyes for a moment and waited for the world to stop spinning. When I next opened them, I felt steady enough to get up and note, for what must have been the hundredth time, that I had to press Galen on making a better version of this spell.

I made my way to the bedroom, where I switched from my dress to some casual sleepwear. I made sure to carefully hang up the cloak and put away the ankle boots that I'd borrowed from Lady Behnaz. Then I headed to the bathroom to 'shake the dew off the lily pad', as my mom would have said. Once that was done, I pinned my hair back and removed my makeup with water and a bar of Castile soap. Then I hesitated as I reached for my toothbrush. I was still a little wound up from the events of the day. The clock was inching perilously close to midnight, and I wanted to make sure I got a full night of shuteye. One of my tricks was to drink a small glass of cherry juice before finally brushing my teeth and hitting the hay. Padding out to the kitchen, I got out a shot glass with the blue and orange Chicago Bears logo on it and poured myself a dose of sleepy time goodness. I'd just put the juice bottle back in the fridge when I noticed a blinking light from where I had my cell phone tucked in its charger.

I tried to avoid bringing my cell phone to Andeluvia. Fitzwilliam was skittish about bringing in technology from my world – after all, one of our inventions had been used to slay his father. Not to mention that there was no signal across worlds. And even if there was, I suspected that the roaming charges alone would've punched a huge hole in my bank account.

I picked the phone up out of curiosity. The screen showed that I'd

gotten a voicemail at five in the afternoon from the OME office. I didn't recognize the extension, so I dialed up voicemail and listened to the message.

"Dayna, it's Naomi from Administration." Naomi's normally brisk, impersonal intonations were overlaid with worry. "I followed up on Shelly Richardson. She last called in sick a full week ago, and nobody's been able to contact her since. When you get this message, can you please check up on her and let me know that she's all right? Thanks."

My stomach took a hard nosedive as soon as the message clicked off. With one hand, I put the glass of juice in the fridge and with the other I speed dialed Shelly's number. Her phone rang three times and then clicked over without any answering machine message.

That wordless silence scared me even more.

Sleep was out of the question now. I ran back into the bedroom, shucked my sleepwear, and threw on a pair of jeans and a fresh cotton shirt. I didn't hesitate as I slipped on my shoulder holster and badge, and then threw my jacket on. A pair of socks and running shoes later, I snatched my car keys from their usual dish and tried calling Shelly again as I went to the garage. Still no answer. I tried again a couple minutes later as I steered my vehicle up the onramp to the freeway. Pulse racing, I forced myself to put the phone down. Instead, I focused on keeping my car in its lane and a mere twenty miles an hour above the speed limit.

A bright wedge of moon hung all alone in the sky. Even at the witching hour, the city lights were bright enough to outshine and blot out everything else save for Mercury and Venus. At least the day of the week was in my favor. On Friday or Saturdays, the freeways could be backed up until the wee hours with people going to or coming from parties and concerts. But tonight, the traffic on the roads moved along smoothly.

I screeched my way off the I-5 and through a maze of suburban homes done up in stucco and Spanish tile until I spotted her place at the very end of a cul-de-sac. Shelly lived in a ranch-style house that I could only describe as 'cute'. She'd picked out a look for the place that

resided somewhere on the color spectrum between ripening nectarine and melted butter. To protect both windows and the porch from the scorching summer sun, she'd installed a set of peppermint-striped cloth awnings.

Those same cheery awnings cast eerie shadows now.

I pulled up into the driveway and shut off my car's motor. The night swallowed up the sound of anything but my footsteps. All the windows were dark, so I relied upon the light from a nearby streetlamp to make my way up the footpath of decorative stepping stones towards the door. I switched over to using my phone to light the way as I moved under the awning.

Something moved stealthily to my left and heart leapt into my throat. The breeze had nudged Shelly's hanging porch swing into motion. I muttered a curse then grabbed the bronze door knocker and gave it a series of raps.

No answer.

"Shelly?" I called out.

Only the wind answered.

Something deep inside me turned to ice, slip-sliding all the way down my spine. Dropping the knocker, I used my fist to pound on the door, calling out Shelley's name again and again.

I've seen enough slasher flicks to know what comes next, I thought sardonically. *The door will swing open with a spooky creeeeeak so I can go inside to get hacked up by an ax murderer.*

After I'd given the door four or five hits with my fist, it swung halfway open with a spooky *creeeeeak*.

The hallway beyond was pitch black and dead silent.

Yeah, *that* sent the prickles up my arms.

I had to go inside. I wasn't about to let my friend's disappearance go on for one minute longer because I got the heebie-jeebies over a creaky door. But before I went in I shone my phone's light on the door's frame, as well as the knob's face and strike plates.

Everything was intact. No sign of forced entry. I took a deep breath, reached around inside, and tested the knob's action. It moved freely, so it had been left unlocked.

Shelly lived just outside the city limits but still within spitting distance and aggressively urban. No one here left their front door unlocked after midnight.

I reached inside again and patted around blindly on the wall next to the door. If there was a light switch in there, my fingers weren't finding it. I reached inside my jacket and pulled out my gun.

If there *was* an ax murderer waiting for me inside, I was damn well going to make him *work* for his kill.

Next I tried opening the door further, but it jammed on something lying on the floor. I turned to the side and squeezed through the gap. The air smelled stale, and as soon as I took another step, the maggoty stench of rotting meat filled my nostrils.

I clamped down on my thoughts before I gave in to panic.

That's something else they never show you in the movies, I thought crazily. The investigator usually stumbles upon the body on-camera. Or at least the soundtrack buzzes with the sound of carrion flies. But in reality, it was usually the smell that you encountered first.

The smell of meat. Of decomposing flesh.

"Shelly?" I called out, trying to keep the quaver out of my voice. "Shelly, this is really creeping me out, so speak up if you can hear me!"

No reply.

I cast my light about the room, making jumpy shadows wherever the beam touched. The familiar shapes of a television, a floral-patterned couch, and a cherry wood book case slid across my vision. Then I spotted a light switch on the wall off to my right.

I all but leapt towards the switch and flicked it to the 'up' position. A set of recessed ceiling lights winked on, set dimly enough so that I only had to blink a couple of times to clear my vision. I stuck my phone back into my pocket, but I kept my weapon out and ready.

Edging back towards the entrance, I risked a glance down. A shapeless, multicolored hump lay slumped or jammed immediately behind the door. It took a full second of staring for my fear-addled brain to recognize that it was a pile of unopened mail. Shelly had a mail slot in the lower third of the door, and the postman had been

shoving letters and junk mail though, causing them to build up on the other side.

It was a lot of mail. Enough to make up a week's worth, at least.

I forced myself to open each door along the long, long main hallway of the house. At each room, I'd fiddle for a light switch and then peek in, gun clenched white-knuckled in my hand. As I cleared each room, I left the lights on behind me. A thrifty homeowner like Shelly might complain about the power bill later, but right now I was beyond caring.

The rotting meat smell grew thicker and nastier as I worked my way towards the rear of the house. It ratcheted up from a two on my Chrissie Scale of Stinkiness and was working its way up to a five when I saw it.

A wave of ants crawled up from a notch by the baseboard and along the floor towards the final room, which was a grand French country style kitchen. The ants and a few other larger, flying bugs had worked their way across the kitchen tile and up the front of one of the counters. They were having a grand old time chowing down on the boiled-till-it cracked contents of a beef roast sitting in a long cold crock pot.

I leaned against a wall and let out a breath. I'd let my expectations and my worst nightmare scenario completely rattle my nerves. Nothing I had seen pointed towards violence. If anything, it felt like the house had just been abandoned in the middle of dinner prep. That made the whole thing feel like the mystery of the *Mary Celeste*. I'd take that over finding Shelly's dead body on the floor.

Only one last detail nagged me. One thing out of place. Off to the side of the kitchen lay a small dining nook. A chair had been left out at the table, as if someone had gotten up and never come back.

Holstering my gun, I went over and took a closer look. A single sheet of paper lay on the placemat. A pepper shaker in the shape of a crowing rooster had been positioned to hold the sheet in place.

The handwriting was in pencil, and it was shaky. Jittery, as if the writer had been hopped up on stimulants. But I recognized the high loops and dips of Shelly's cursive script. She had left only one

sentence for me to guess her fate.

I can't take it anymore…I need to help.

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Chapter Fifteen

This should have been thrilling.

For the first time, I entered the throne room as Dame Chrissie. The blue-white light that came from the alcoves on the way up to the throne now mingled with orange flickers. The flickers came from the room's hearth, a car-sized opening carved into the shape of a dragon-like maw. A roaring fire crackled away, driving back the cold.

I should have welcomed the warmth. Winter was descending on the Andeluvian capital with a vengeance. Frost rimed the edges of the windows and I'd been able to see my breath in the antechamber.

But inside, I still felt chilled to the bone.

As soon as I found Shelly's note, I'd dialed 911. The beat cops who responded recognized me and were extra careful about not touching things as they looked through the rooms of the house and did a sweep around the outside. They didn't find anything new. In the meantime, given the blessed absence of a body, I took note of what Shelly had left behind: the putrid pot roast, her car, her key ring, purse, and phone.

The last day I'd seen her, Shelly had looked as if she'd lost ten pounds on the meth-head diet. She'd had circles under her eyes like dark bruises. Her voice had trembled as she told me about how her sleep had been disturbed.

I just can't…it just ain't restful at all. I keep havin' variations of the same dream, over and over again. You're in most all of them.

I kept showing up in her dreams because I'd brought Destry in for her to examine. And the pooka, in a desperate bid to protect me, had ensorcelled Bob McClatchy with a mind-bending spell. That spell had shown me just how powerful a pooka could be, but it had also put a kink in Shelly's thoughts. Because I hadn't acted fast enough, that kink had sent her over the edge.

And just when my friend needed me the most, I was out playing lady of the court in a medieval land. I had visions of Shelly wandering the streets of Los Angeles without a dollar in her pocket, lost in the

recesses of her mind and getting into god-knows-what trouble.

The guilt threatened to boil up and out of my throat, choking me.

Sounds of lords in angry conversation jerked me back into the present as I took the three steps up onto the royal platform at the end of the throne room. Said platform held a pair of curved oak tables extending out from either side of the throne in a shallow 'C' shape.

As soon as I stepped up the assembled nobles, each clad in a mélange of fur-trimmed robes or vividly colored mantles, turned to glare at me. I could swear that I heard a collective *growl* as I drew near. I heard my name said, in various degrees of anger, from up by the throne. That just made my morning. My stomach tied itself into yet another knot.

Ignoring the stares and glares I made my way up towards the front. Three men stood by the king's empty seat, still engaged in heated conversation. I recognized the tallest, grimmest-looking one with the fringe of black beard as Lord Ivor. He was the only lord to wear armor, a sort of scaled-plate thing emblazoned with the sigil of a pale half-moon.

The muscular one, an older knight wearing gold-trimmed plate armor, was Commander Yervan of the Palace Guard. He'd been one of the few knights in my corner from practically the beginning, as he'd been present when I'd unmasked the Good King Benedict's murderer.

As a matter of fact, he'd helped me take the last man of the group into custody. Lord Behnaz was still as red-faced and potbellied as ever. And he gave me a glare that was, if anything, a couple degrees colder than the collective court. If I'd been a piece of meat, I'd have been freezer burned by now.

"Ah, it is good of you to join us, Dame Chrissie," Commander Yervan said smoothly. "We have been discussing you. And the matter of chairs."

"Me. And…chairs?" I asked.

I cringed at how stupid that sounded. But I had absolutely no idea what was going on, and I'd entered this conversation around Act Two.

"It turns out that we are out of chairs, as every seat here is taken." Yervan cast a hard look around the room as he added, "No one was

willing to give up theirs. So, I went to the royal storeroom and was able to find a spare."

He pointed at the chair he'd placed off in a corner. It was made in the same general design as the other chairs at the table, with flat, smooth arms and a vaguely trapezoidal shape that made the seat wider at the front than the back. It had the royal pattern resembling a fleur-de-lis carved on the back, and it was made of the same oak-y type of wood.

That was where the resemblance ended.

The wood itself had been treated or finished improperly, as if one side had been left to bleach in the sun. The fleur-de-lis on the back looked okay, but the chair's other carvings had been defaced by someone with a pocket knife and a bad case of attention-deficit disorder. The seat cushion was ripped, lumpy, and splotched with a suspicious-looking set of brown and off-white stains. And to top it off, the damned thing tilted to one side.

This whole 'attend the royal court' thing was looking less glamorous by the minute.

"Well, I appreciate the gesture, Commander," I said tightly. I walked over to the corner and tried to pick up the pathetic piece of furniture they'd assigned to me. The surface felt as sticky as a movie theatre floor in bad need of a mop. I did my best to ignore it.

The damned thing was heavy, but I would cut my own throat before I'd ask for help from anyone here. So, I went around to the back side and tilted the chair up on two legs. The legs made a fingernails-on-the-blackboard *scraaaaaape,* and every knight, lord, and lady in attendance made a face, cringed, or tried to cover their ears as I dragged the chair across the polished stone floor.

"What in all of Andeluvia is that ghastly noise?" King Fitzwilliam demanded, as he entered the room. A bunch of pages darted about him like a little school of tropical fish.

"Dame Chrissie has just located her chair, your Majesty," Commander Yervan replied.

"That's one thing taken care of, at least," Fitzwilliam opined as he ascended the steps. Behnaz and Ivor took their seats and Yervan

moved aside. The King took his royal seat, asking, “Are we ready to open the court for business, then?”

“Not yet, Sire. We have not determined where we can place her.”

Lords Ivor and Behnaz glared again, this time at each other. I suddenly realized what the heated discussion about me had involved. Since the first of the kingdom’s monarchs, the wing to the king’s left held lords from the Eastern Reaches. Those from the Western Reaches sat to the right. The more senior or influential one was, the closer they sat to the king.

I wasn’t from the eastern or western geographic area. I didn’t have family ties anywhere, either. I’d asked for a palace tower as my ‘lands’, which was in the exact center of the kingdom.

On top of that, no one wanted to claim me.

King Fitzwilliam considered. “Then Dame Chrissie shall be seated…behind and off to the side of the throne.”

I wasn’t exactly thrilled by that prospect, but the King had spoken. So, I tilted the chair up and dragged it over with the same piercing *scraaaaape* across the stone floor.

“Your Majesty,” Yervan said respectfully. “It has ever been that only the Palace Guard may sit anywhere to the rear of the monarch. It is we who must stand between the royal body and an assassin’s blade.”

“Surely we can make an exception?”

“It’s your choice, Sire. Speaking as your protector, I must ask you to consider the value you place upon your own life.”

Fitzwilliam chewed his lip for a moment in irritation. “Very well, then. Dame Chrissie, come sit to the right of my throne.”

I tilted the chair up a third time. This time the *scraaaaape* echoed like a banshee’s scream off the vaulted stone walls. A couple of people muttered curses and shivered in their fur-trimmed finery.

“Your Majesty, this is an outrage!” Lord Behnaz protested.

Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. “Lord Behnaz, this is a mere seat change.”

“I am the lord paramount of the Western Reaches!” Behnaz thundered. He pounded the table with one beefy fist. “I and my

predecessors have always sat at your right. This is a demotion, and I shall not stand for it!"

"So be it, Lord Behnaz. Since you are ungracious and grasping, Dame Chrissie shall sit to the left of my throne."

Once again, I began pulling my chair with a *scraaaaaape* around behind the throne and over to the left. People had begun plugging their ears with their fingers, and even Fitzwilliam looked like he was grinding his teeth.

"Now *I* must protest!" Lord Ivor declared, as he crossed his arms and jutted his bony chin out like a bratty two-year-old. "It is bad enough that one is demoted and treated like a commoner at court. But you are sullying the reputation of House Ivor, the only house which has remained steadfastly loyal to your father since–"

"Enough!" Fitzwilliam roared. "Do I command a group of Andeluvian lords or a gaggle of sulky children? Dame Chrissie is to remain at my side, for I shall be tasking her with matters that pertain directly to this court."

He let out an irritated sigh as he went on. "A compromise is in order. Dame Chrissie, during your first session at this royal court, you shall sit on the right, between me and Lord Behnaz. For the second, you shall sit on the left, between me and Lord Ivor, alternating each time you attend from now on. Is that acceptable *to you?*"

"Quite acceptable, Sire," I choked out. Right now I dearly wished there was a hole in the floor I could jump into and zip closed behind me.

"Well that it should, for apparently you are the only one here with more common sense than a cart full of turnips!" That comment earned me an extra crop of sour looks from everyone at both tables as the King went on. "And should anyone else object, speak up now, for there are many empty rooms in the dungeon, and I hate wasted space."

With that, for one final time, I dragged the chair back around with that same soul-sucking *scraaaaaape* and shoved it into the space between the throne and the right-hand table. Again, people plugged their ears; Fitzwilliam closed his eyes in pain, and a lady at the far end

of one table broke down in tears.

Yes, this was easily the worst first day on the job I'd ever had.

I sat down in my chair, which made an ominous *squeal*. One of the legs shifted, tilting me ten degrees further to the right, while a lump in the stained cushion pressed into the side of my butt, making me wince. As I shifted to try and get comfortable, the chair's left hand arm gave a *pop* and came off in my hand.

Fitzwilliam stared at me with incredulity. I'd probably laugh this off later, but right now? There was absolutely, positively, no way this could get any worse.

"Sire!" came the call of one of the royal pages from the throne room's antechamber. "Mistress Xandra of the Parliament seeks an audience immediately!"

"Any member of Parliament can damn well go through the usual channels, without using a page to summon me like a schoolboy!" Fitzwilliam grumped.

But even as he spoke, Xandra fluttered into the room. She beat her wings as she soared up towards the throne. Then she spread her feathers and came in for a landing atop the table next to Lord Ivor. She let out a breathless 'hoo!'.

"One greets your Majesty with quick courtesy," she said, in a voice that quivered with strong emotion. "Quick courtesy, as one gives upon momentous tidings. One hopes offense is not taken, yet the speed of a galloping horse is sometimes more prudent than that of a–"

"Mistress Xandra," King Fitzwilliam said, cutting her off. "This has been a most difficult start of the day for my court. Tidings are ill-timed. Unless someone has died, then I want you to schedule a time to be heard."

Xandra cocked her head at the King. "One wonders if the ruler of men can also see into the future. For this one does bring tidings of death."

That made me sit up. In fact, it made everyone sit up and take note.

"What tidings are these, Parliamentarian?"

"One is sad, sad indeed, to be the bearer of shocking news,"

Xandra said, her voice lowering in sorrow. “For our beloved Albess has been slain most terribly by a rogue wyvern, and one shall not see another of her wisdom and kindness again.”

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Chapter Sixteen

King Fitzwilliam looked pale, as if someone had leeched all blood and breath from him.

"The Albess is…but how?" His voice rose to bounce off the throne room's massive overhead beams. "In the name of all the Noctua hold sacred, I charge you, tell me how!"

Xandra's beak clacked in distress, but the sounds of yet another commotion from the antechamber drowned her out as three more owls soared in and hovered before the throne. Fitzwilliam motioned curtly to one of the nearby pages, who lugged out a black T-bar and placed it where Raisah and her two thuggish companions could perch. The trio settled on the bar, their metal clad feet making audible *clacks* as they gripped the bar securely. The owl on the left, who I recognized as Nix, balanced on one foot as he gripped some small object in his claws.

"One sees that news has distressed the ruler of men," Raisah intoned, in that same, eerily cool voice. "The Albess has flown beyond the sky to meet the ancestors, and she shall be missed by all. As much distress as men might feel, one can imagine the sorrow that courses through the veins of one's own kin."

"Yes, I can certainly tell how anguished you appear to be," Fitzwilliam said, in a similarly cool tone. "Thus I charge thee to reaffirm the Oath of Fealty. The Oath that binds men and owls in fair exchange. Power to power, coin to purse, hand to mind, truth to truth. Tell my court exactly what happened."

"One accepts the charge. The events show much as sunlight on meadow. The Albess is one whose rest is as turbulent as the muttering sea. As those of old, the Blessed One travels at a time drowned out by the rays of sun."

Fitzwilliam sat back in his throne, his frown only deepening. Mutters of 'what does this mean?' and 'damned owl-talk' came from the people around me. However, I'd already spent time in Parliament deciphering the unique way that these raptors spoke. Sometimes it

was straightforward, but other times it felt like my synapses weren't snapping quite right.

After taking the oath to tell the truth, Raisah had mentioned the Albess' turbulent rest and fact that she traveled in daytime. At least that made sense to me. I was one of the few who knew that the Albess suffered from insomnia, and was as likely to be awake and out flying during the day as at night.

"Upon the last sunset, the Blessed One alit upon a branch near the flowery pool. There it was, at the place where flower and forest and water meet, that the wyvern struck. Naught remained of the Albess, save a single feather."

With that, Nix extended his wings and made a sort of midair hop from his perch. The talons of one foot unclenched and a single horn feather drifted down into Fitzwilliam's open hand. Nix settled back onto the bar next to Raisah, his eyes unreadable.

Fitzwilliam looked the feather over then handed it to his right without looking at me. I took it, cupping the object in my hands so I could get a better look. The nobles broke out in a new batch of whispers. Notes of alarm, sorrow and worry were sprinkled throughout the background, though all went quiet as the King put his hand up for silence.

"Where is this place you speak of?" he asked. "The place where flower and forest and water meet? I do not recognize it."

Raisah returned Fitzwilliam's inquisitive gaze. Her masklike markings hid her emotions better than a black veil. Her beak snapped, annoyed, before she spoke again.

"Those of the Hoohan see it plain as moonlight on snow," she repeated. "One might travel a half turn of the sun upon the back of a horse north and west to see it. Orbs of sun upon stalks there are, shining without burning."

I bit my lip. *Orbs of sun upon stalks there are, shining without burning…*

"Pardon, Sire," I said. "But…are there any lords or knights of the Western Reaches who cultivate sunflowers on their land?"

Fitzwilliam raised an eyebrow. "I have no idea. Lord Behnaz,

would you know?"

Behnaz thought for a moment. The effort made his already reddish complexion turn the color of a freshly picked beet. "Yes. One of my knights, Sir Talish, grows them on his estate."

"Would that estate lie to the north and west of here?"

"It does, your Majesty. His demesne does lie at the edge of some pockets of forest. And his lands contain a large fishpond."

"Very well. I shall have a royal detachment visit Sir Talish's demesnes as soon as possible."

Now it was Raisah's turn to blink in surprise. "One wonders why this must be done."

"Men and owls are united, as always," Fitzwilliam said, showing a toothy smile. "I wish only to send a detail of my people to the place the Albess died to show respect for her. To learn about and see how she 'flew beyond the sky'. Surely, one would have no objection to that."

Raisah quickly smoothed out her feathers. "One sees no objection, none at all. Wings and watchers there shall be at the place of death, as soon as your men arrive. The watchers shall bring those whose eyes saw all that happened to our Blessed One."

I listened to the exchange between Raisah and Fitzwilliam with half my attention, if that. I had brought my nose down into the bowl created by my cupped hands. I sniffed, and came up with the barest trace of an acrid, foul odor, like cabbage that had gone off.

Something I didn't expect at all, but smelled very familiar.

Sulfur.

"Very well," King Fitzwilliam said. "Though the Albess' death is so fresh as to be painful, I must ask: how will this affect the Hoohan, and in turn, my kingdom's lifeblood?"

That brought my head back up. I paid rapt attention, as did all the surrounding nobles.

"We of the Hoohan shall mourn. In time, the new Albess shall be born, one who shall be Anointed and beyond Anointed. One who shall bring worthiness to all the Hoohan."

Xandra, who had shifted her perch over to a nearby serving table,

bobbed her head violently at that. I watched her out of the corner of my eye, so as to not attract attention to her, but she seemed to be in distress. Her beak opened and closed soundlessly, and she shifted on her perch as if her talons hurt her.

"Until the new Albess is born and ready to serve, who leads the Hoohan? Who runs your Parliament?"

"One asks so rudely, do they not?" Raisah puffed her chest up so that she appeared to grow in size. "Yet one shall be tolerant, for this humble servant shall act as Holy Steward for the Order of the Noctua until the day of glory approaches."

Fitzwilliam drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne. "I'm glad that your holy order has guidance. But I must ask: what of my kingdom's budget? We have been kept in suspense for far too long since the Albess vanished from sight."

"A Holy Steward is one who holds the pen, and that pen may not be rushed. Especially when a kingdom of men has made such rash, unwise decisions." A gleam came into the owl's cold eye as she shifted her gaze ever so slightly in my direction. "While that time passes, surely the royal coffers are awash in golden coin."

"Coin exists," Fitzwilliam gritted. "But the coffers are hardly, as you put it, 'awash'."

Raisah and her pair of sidekicks spread their wings. Xandra followed suit a moment later. The Holy Steward's beak made a 'hoo!' that sounded like a dismissive laugh before she spoke one last time.

"It seems that one must tighten their belt for the lean times. And hope that loyalty is upheld by sworn oath and not a full purse."

The four owls took to the air and vanished from the throne room as quickly and quietly as they'd arrived.

And my plans to move first on Belladonna's words lay shattered beyond repair.

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Chapter Seventeen

"We have a week at most," I announced to my three friends, as we reconvened in my tower room. "In that time, I'm supposed to join a group to visit Sir Talish's estate, somewhere in the Western Reach. Officially, it's to honor the memory of the Albess."

"And unofficially, to see if she was slain, or murdered," Liam said, finishing my thought. "I'm still in shock over Thea's demise. Part of me wants you to find out that it *was* murder."

"Aye," Shaw agreed. "Thus we might exact vengeance upon the guilty party. 'Tis seems so convenient that a 'rogue' reptile might slay her. Yet I must ask: what difference doth a week make?"

I held my hands out towards the fire that Galen had started in the tower hearth. I was still used to thermostats and forced air heating. Without a fire constantly going, the round stone chamber that made up my meeting space could turn as cold as the OME's chiller room.

"It's important, because that's when King Fitzwilliam's treasury starts running critically low. That's the same treasury that pays for keeping up this palace, the salaries for everyone in the Royal Guard, the servants, and the all-important monetary 'gifts' to his Lords."

"Surely, thy benefactor has gold aplenty."

"Not necessarily," Galen pointed out. "Much as I admired the Good King Benedict, he frequently bestowed lavish gifts upon commoners, lords, and above all, himself. His talents lay in enjoying the life of profligate consumption, as opposed to fiscal management. Then, after his murder, the royal coffers were administered by Magnus, in his guise as Duke Kajari."

Shaw made a snort of leonine contempt. "I do not recall thy nemesis being especially generous."

"Not publicly. However, he spent substantially behind the scenes to retain his power, mostly by bribing lords who mistrusted the idea of his running the kingdom until Benedict's son could return. On top of this, Fitzwilliam's proposed budget has been sitting unsigned on Parliament's perch since he first wished to hire Dayna as the Court

Forensics Examiner. Meaning that the kingdom has already been operating out of the royal coffers for quite some time now."

"The wells aren't even dry yet, and the lords are already restless," I said, as the warmth penetrated my cold hands. "Behnaz claims that unless he gets the bulk of the remaining royal funds, the Western Reaches will collapse into anarchy."

"He does have problems with banditry," Liam admitted. "And with keeping discipline amongst the mercenaries he originally hired to keep the bandits down. My people have had to put up magical wards to discourage them from encroaching upon our woods."

I ran my fingers through my hair, trying my best not to tug it out in frustration. "Of course, Lord Ivor countered this by saying that he should get the bulk of what gold remains, or the Eastern Reaches will collapse into bankruptcy and ruin."

"Fitzwilliam hath stripped Behnaz of all trained dragons and Air Cavalry units," Shaw acknowledged. "T'was to punish him and limit his power. Ivor has them in his care now. 'Tis a princely sum indeed to keep these units in fighting shape."

"Ivor doesn't retain all of the kingdom's aerial assets," Galen clarified. "Fitzwilliam keeps a lance of dragons at the palace's Southern Keep for rapid deployment to the West."

I shook my head. "It makes little difference. Fitzwilliam's assessment of his kingdom is correct. There are too many men in Andeluvia without enough warring for their tastes. The money to keep them happy and employed must keep flowing. And in a week…"

Liam gave me a startled look. "Will the King force you to step down? Is that even possible?"

"I don't believe there is precedent," Galen considered. "And let us not forget that your investiture was presented by three separate kingdoms outside Fitzwilliam's."

"The Wizard speaks true!" Shaw bobbed his head forcefully. "We would not take thy humiliation and dismissal lightly!"

"I appreciate it, guys," I said, as I turned away from the fire. "Personally, I'd rather step down before jeopardizing the kingdom, but honestly I don't think it would do any good. This is about more than

Raisah's refusal to sign a budget, or Fitzwilliam getting around the owl's objections to hiring me by making me a Dame. She's actually willing to destabilize this entire kingdom – the one that provides her people with their jobs!"

And speaking of jobs, I thought bitterly, *this 'Dame' thing could end up being the shortest one I've ever had.*

"Truly, these are troubling times," Galen sympathized. "Given the shortage of currency caused by the owls, the most prudent course would be to refrain from conspicuous displays of wealth or frippery until the crisis passes."

There was a *rat-tat-tat* machine gun rapping at the door. Shaw sidled over, hooked one of his lion's paws around the wide-set iron handle, and pulled the door open. The rail-thin man outside came face-to-beak with Grimshaw's stern face.

"Oh my, oh my!" he quavered, in a high-pitched voice. "Nice… griffin?"

"Speak thy peace, knave," Shaw rumbled, "Else I shall clout thee."

"Might…Dame Chrissie be in residence?"

"Aye. Speak with care to her, else I might have to eject thee most forcefully," he growled. The man scurried past, never quite turning his back on the griffin. I couldn't blame him. Griffins were darned intimidating to begin with, and Shaw radiated a playful dangerousness on top of that.

The man came to a halt before me. Ignoring both centaur and fayleene, he looked me over critically from head to toe. I suppose that I did the same right on back, because he wore the most garish outfit I'd yet seen in Andeluvia.

Compared to my own world's Middle Ages, Andeluvians seemed to have a pretty good handle on fabric dyes. The difference between rich and poor was marked less by color type and more by the vividness of the shades. By that standard, this fellow was very rich indeed.

His shiny black shoes were sharply pointed, like the king's formal footwear. His long, scrawny legs were covered in bright green hose, making them look like beanpoles. And his doublet was a rich checkerboard of red and black squares, each containing the silhouette

of an animal or an abstract symbol. A roundlet-style hat the exact shade of eggplant hung from his high domed head at a sharp angle.

As a matter of fact, this fellow was all angles, from sharp jaw and jutting nose to pointy knees. His deep-set black eyes were keenly intelligent, and he held a leather-bound book like a precious family keepsake in the crook of his arm. Aside from his surprise at seeing Shaw at the door, he seemed confident and in his element.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I am Herald, the Lord of the Pursuivant," he said, giving me a shallow bow. He paused as if waiting for something, long enough so that the moment grew slightly awkward.

"So…what can I do for you, Lord Herald?"

"Herald is fine, Dame Chrissie. Though my title includes Lord, I am strictly an officer of the court, not a noble." He paused, adding, "You…that is, you *are* Dame Chrissie?"

That didn't sound flattering. "Yes, that would be me. Is there a problem?"

"No! No, not at all," he said, his tongue almost tripping over itself in his haste to apologize. "It's just that I was expecting…well, someone quite different."

"Different? How?"

"Ah. Well. Now we come to delicate matters," he said, shifting his book from one arm to the other. "I had heard of your encounter with Sir Varad, you see, and the description was rather lurid."

I traded a look with my three friends. "Go on."

"It is said that when he insulted you, you grabbed one of the greatswords that hang in the halls to use on him. Furthermore, I hear that you lopped off Varad's manhood…and, er, stuffed it in his mouth, then used a bulrush whip to flog him about the palace grounds."

Galen put his hand over his mouth and did his best to look serious. Shaw and Liam each turned away so that I couldn't see their faces, but their bodies shook with laughter. I made a theatrical sigh. In for a penny and all that…

"That is nothing but a base, unfounded rumor," I said sternly. "I did not, as a matter of fact, flog Sir Varad about the palace grounds."

“And the rest?” the Lord of the Pursuivant asked meekly.

“Herald, I wish you to call me Dayna when we are in private,” I said, heartily clapping him on the shoulder. “Do you know why?”

He shook his head.

“Because when I get mad, I try *not* to cut off the private parts of anyone I’ve trusted with my first name.”

Herald gulped. “I shall consider myself blessed, then.”

“You do that. Now, the King told me to expect you, since I needed someone to describe my duties.”

“Yes, all that and much more,” he said, patting his huge book. “Among other things, I am to first help you select your new heraldry, your knightly sigil.”

“That’s the first thing?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh, of course, of course! We need your sigil for use in the festival.”

I started getting a bad feeling about this. “What festival?”

“Why, the one celebrating your ascension as the new Dame of the Court, Dayna!” The prospect seemed to invigorate him. “It is rare, perhaps once in a generation that we get a new piece of heraldry to design. Your device shall fly proudly on twenty-foot golden damask banners along every major street of the city – so everyone shall know who you are!”

Both Shaw and Liam, who had finally turned back around, looked as shocked as a deer and a griffin could be. Galen’s mouth dropped open at Herald’s visions. As the Wizard had said, given the grumblings of the nobles, my best bet was *to keep my head low*.

So this ‘festival’ would be a dream come true for every newly minted knight, dame, or lord.

But it had to come to me at this exact time.

You know, there are times where I’m sure that if I didn’t have rotten luck, I’d have no luck at all.

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Chapter Eighteen

"Let's put a pin in the festival thing for now," I said. "Can we talk about the specifics for my Damehood as per King Fitzwilliam?"

The change in subject didn't dent Herald's enthusiasm one bit. "Very well, then I shall go over the terms of your investiture, as spelled out to me by the King himself!"

The Lord of the Pursuivant put his heavy book down on the table as I and my friends gathered round. Reaching into a pocket cut into the side of his doublet he pulled out a scroll of parchment. The parchment had been sealed with a dried purple blob of wax and imprinted with the figure of a rampant griffin. A quick jab with a thumbnail, and Herald broke the seal and began reading.

"Let's see…I hereby declare this document valid, as King Fitzwilliam, son of the Good King Benedict and line of Julian the Conqueror…blah blah blah…" The scroll crinkled, shedding bits of wax as he rotated its axis. "Ah, here we are, here we are. Dame Chrissie holds all typical knightly assignments given by the King, but shall not be required to remain within her demesnes unless specifically ordered."

That worked for me. Not only did it leave me free to travel between worlds, it meant I didn't have to clock in and out.

"What does 'typical knightly assignments' mean?" I asked.

"You might be called upon to perform a ceremony for the court, things of that nature," Herald said offhandedly, before adding, "Oh, that's right. You did not grow up within a 'knightly' culture. Chiefly, this means that you could be summoned to war at any time of the monarch's choosing."

"Great," I said, without enthusiasm.

"A realm such as ours needs heroes. And heroines, for that matter of fact," he added quickly. "Let's see…King Fitzwilliam has given you some token strips of land in the foothills to the south. However, he has decided to grant your request for grounds within the walls of his palace. Specifically, this entire four-level tower."

“Really?” This surprised me. I was hoping for just the turret room, but this was a lot more generous than I’d even thought to ask for. “I’m not evicting anyone, am I?”

“The room below this one was a former guardhouse, now a little-used armory. The two rooms under that are used to store various dry goods. You might speak with a stonemason to create an entry if you’d like to convert them into, say, chambers for sleeping and bathing. Which reminds me of something.” Herald fumbled in his pocket a second time, and gave me a brass circlet with a set of five keys. Each key was a thick slab of metal longer than my hand. “Four of these go to your tower’s rooms. The fifth is in deference to your gender. The King has granted you sole access to the *necessarium* down the hall.”

“The what?”

Herald’s cheeks turned ever so slightly pink. “The, ah, privy.”

“A private washroom? I’ll have to thank the King for that.”

“While you have not been granted private servants, you can call on the royal pages at any time. They can provide you with food, drink, and supplies in the quantities you request, though anything ‘excessive’ should probably be cleared by His Majesty.”

Room service, too. I was liking this more and more.

“As a liege of our monarch, you are entitled to pick out a half-suit of plate or a full kit of mail from the armory, and two weapons of your choice. There is some sort of discount offered on repairs, though you should speak to the blacksmith on your own about it.”

I envisioned a paper card with little anvil shaped hole punches. As for the two weapons of choice, I’d have to think about it for a while. Maybe I could gift someone a mace or something for Christmas.

“There is one final item of note. His Majesty has suggested that you consider having some new clothes made. Apparently, he feels that the more you look like an Andeluvian, the easier it will be for the nobles to accept you at court.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. “Is there a royal tailor or something?”

“There is, and I have been tasked to convey your measurements to him.” Herald dug a third time in his pocket and came up with a length

of orange string. “May I?”

I nodded, and he proceeded to use the string like a tape measure. I didn’t see any markings along its length, so I was more than a little puzzled how the thing worked, but Herald did seem to know his business. I raised my arms or stood straight as needed, until he had committed my numbers to memory.

“If I have a choice, I’d like a piece of clothing other than a court gown,” I suggested. “I really need something I can travel in, especially as it’s getting cold.”

Herald rubbed the tips of his outstretched fingers together for a moment. Apparently, that was one of the man’s tics when he was busy thinking. “I think that can be accommodated. Now, as to your heraldic device for the festival–”

“Ah, yeah. That. As I said, let’s put a pin in it.”

He blinked. “Perhaps I am unsure what that phrase means.”

“It means to come back to it later. Tell you what, I’ll think on it and let you know what I come up with.”

Give Herald credit, at least he could hear the dismissal in my voice. He placed the book he’d brought on the table next to the scroll, bowed to each of us, and then turned to leave. “Very well, Dayna. If you can, be sure to page through my book of heraldic devices. You may find inspiration in it for your own sigil. I will look forward to the time you call upon me.”

“So do I. Um, how do I get in touch with you?”

“My advice would be to install a bell to summon a page. It’s considered unseemly to tramp through the palace demanding to see people.”

“I’ll put it on my to-do list,” I promised, and showed him out the exit.

As he left, I spotted movement from the corner of my eye.

It could have been a trick of the light, but I swore I’d seen the shadowy form of an owl flitting off down the corridor.

I shut the door then set the key ring on the table and sat down, feeling suddenly dejected. Yes, getting the tower as my headquarters was a step up in this world. But it didn’t change the fact that I was

being watched all the time.

"Thou hast spotted our raptor friends, I take it," Shaw said. "I was not sure whether to tell thee. All thy movements are being noted by Raisah."

"I smelled them from the first," Liam added. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to take measures. They cannot hear our discussions in here."

"We're probably secure, but there's no sense not being careful," I agreed. "What were the things you spoke of before? Wards? Can you put one up outside our office here?"

Liam closed his eyes and inclined his head slightly. His antlers glowed for a second.

"Done. My wards do not kill, but they will make any owl lurking in the hall outside very uncomfortable."

"That's something, at least."

"I perceive that there is more to your melancholy," Galen said gently. "Will you share your burden with us?"

"I need to let you all know something," I sighed. "Shelly Richardson, my friend from the OME…she went missing as of last night."

Galen let out a gasp. "That is appalling news. And rather peculiarly timed, considering the straits we find ourselves in."

"I only met her once," Liam said, "But she seemed a true companion to you. This is sad news indeed."

"I do not know thy friend," Shaw added, "Yet could this be related to Thea's murder?"

"Yes and no," I said gloomily. "I mean, I don't think the owls directly have anything to do with it. But she'd been acting strangely before she disappeared, probably close to a week ago. I was at her house, the door was unlocked and nothing had been ransacked or stolen. It's like she just decided to walk out the front door and never come back."

Galen crossed his arms and gave me a serious look. "When you said she was 'acting strangely', might I venture that this included mental and emotional instability?"

“That’s right. It’s got me thinking about Destry’s spell, the one he used on McClatchy.”

The Wizard’s dark brows beetled into a frown. “That pooka wields his power clumsily. Even if we could locate and retrieve him from ‘Tristan Da Cunha’, I’m not sure that the effects of his spell could be undone.”

I put my face in my hands. It took effort, real effort not to let my eyes brim up.

“Dayna,” Galen said softly. “It was not my intention to diminish hope for your friend’s well-being. Rather, I meant to say that healing a psychic wound might be difficult and complex to–”

“It’s not that,” I said, in a broken voice. “It’s just…Andeluvia could fall because of events that I’ve set in motion. The chalkboard… all it does is list my failures. Shelly’s missing or dead because I’ve been so busy nursing my own wounds that I haven’t helped her with hers. And my great idea to beat the owls at their own game? It’s out the window now. *This is all my fault.*”

It went quiet in the room. Very, very quiet. Then I felt a nudge at my elbow. The cool wetness of a fayleene nose.

I looked up. My little homemade family had gathered around me in support. I didn’t know why I’d been so blessed, but I clung to the feeling like a life preserver in a choppy sea.

“It took me a long while to understand you,” Liam began. “I don’t think I really grasped the way your mind works until I became the Protector. You place too much of the world on your shoulders. That’s not the way it works, in your world or mine.”

“Aye,” Shaw said. “Thou might feel responsible for all things from the wee to the mighty. ‘Tis ever the way of the hero. But I say nay. A griffin knows that, at times, there is naught to do but to fly thy own course against the world’s headwinds. And thou art better at it than all I have seen.”

“They speak for me,” Galen said. “And with more eloquence than I can muster.”

I put my hands out to rub the side of Liam’s muzzle in one hand, while scratching Shaw atop his massive eagle head. “You have no idea

what this means to me, guys."

"Thou didst help each of us," Shaw pointed out. "How could we do less for thee?"

I took a breath and steadied myself. "Then I need to ask some favors of you all. Galen, are you still bound to the palace until Fitzwilliam's project is done?"

The Wizard nodded. "I regret to say, yes."

"Then I'd like you to keep your ear to the ground here at court. Liam, the Albess once told me that she had a sleeping spot within the Grove of the Willows. Can you return there and locate it? I'm not sure if we'll find anything that ties in, but it's worth a shot."

"I shall," Liam said. "And I have something else to prepare with my people. Something that might assist us."

"Good," I acknowledged, as I turned to Shaw. "Finally, I'm thinking that Belladonna corresponded with Thea. The High Elder even complained once how difficult it was to understand the owls. I'd like you to ask her about any details of their communications. Again, it's a long shot, but it can't hurt."

"I shall ensure thy wishes are met," Shaw replied.

Galen's hooves clopped as he stepped up to the table. "Fitzwilliam's court assembles on the morning after next. I think it prudent for us to meet here again at that assembly's close. What do you plan to do in the meantime, Dayna?"

"Me?" I stood up and tried to look a shade less anxious. "I've got the worst job of all. I have to leave all of you behind."

"You need to find Shelly." The Wizard did not phrase what he said as a question.

"That's right," I said grimly. "I have to find out what's happened to her, for good or ill."

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Chapter Nineteen

The bright red plastic of my chair let out a pathetic *creak* as I leaned back in it. To pass the time until my host's phone call was completed, I looked up and around the LAPD's newest office wing. At least, it's what passed for an 'office' in my world nowadays.

I sat in a cubicle made up of shoulder high laminate panels covered in ratty blue fabric. The fluorescent lightning didn't exactly flatter anything, either. To top it off, the only real décor was a token picture of family members and a poster of an orange tabby cat dangling from a branch, exhorting the viewer to 'Hang in there!'

I closed my eyes and envisioned the high gray walls of Fitzwilliam's palace. The cathedral-like greenery of the fayleene's old forest. And the glittering mountain of the griffins.

It was so very strange.

When did Andeluvia start to feel more like the 'real' world? I asked myself. *Why does this one feel like a dream world made out of tissue paper and cellophane?*

I shook the feeling off. Fantasies were all nice and good, but if the world I'd been born into was a dream, it could also be nightmarish. Because Shelly was still out there, and getting into a hundred different kinds of trouble, for all I knew.

The OME office had still been dark when I'd shown up at work this morning. I decided to come in early to plow through my ever-growing mountain of paperwork, swearing for the thousandth time that I'd just have a rubber stamp made with my name on it. That way I'd at least cut down on the hand cramps.

Next, I'd packaged up Thea's feather and set it via overnight mail to the private genetics lab that I'd used for the griffin's buccal swabs. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be complaining about contaminated samples this time. As far as I knew, the uniqueness of Andeluvian owls came from their brain size and odd mode of speaking, not from a chimerical mix of genes.

Once the lunch hour had come and gone, I walked over to the

LAPD's cheese grater shaped annex. The group of detectives assigned to Missing Persons was located next to the Homicide Division, so it was easy to find. I'd been to Homicide multiple times, and I knew most everyone by face, if not name.

Detective Maxwell Cohen finished up his call and placed the solid gray receiver of his office phone back in its cradle. The phone matched the man's steel-colored bowl cut and Fuller brush mustache. Cohen was what cops like Esteban called 'short-timers', as they had less than five years to go before retirement. The unspoken implication was that a short-timer wouldn't go out of their way to take any risks, or even work that hard to solve a case. Max never struck me as that sort, though. I'd met him in passing on a couple of cases and he still put the same hours in as anyone else.

Certainly more than a one-third timer like me.

"I take it that you got my voicemail from earlier this morning." Cohen let out a resigned sigh. "I've notified Ms. Richardson's family, and I've still got people doing sweeps of the usual places. And while the note left behind didn't point explicitly towards suicide, I've asked the morgues to report their admitting anyone that matches the description."

"I did get your message," I said tightly. Cohen's recording had tersely informed me that there had been no change in status. "And given my line of work, I think I'll find out about Shelly being admitted to my department before you do."

Max's mustache twitched. "I didn't mean to offend. Maybe I should've been more specific: I asked Orange and Ventura County's morgues to report back to us, in case your friend traveled beyond the city boundaries."

I made a motion to brush the issue away. "You didn't offend me, Max. Sorry. There's been a lot going on in my life lately. I just came by to ask if you'd plugged Shelly's name into the national database yet."

Again with the mustache twitch. Cohen knew that I meant the National Crime Information Center database, or NCIC. And I got the feeling I wasn't going to like the answer.

"No, I didn't. I'm kind of hoping that you can help me out there."

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you need from me?"

"The LAPD's official policy is that we don't enter a missing person into NCIC unless we've got evidence for one of a couple things. First, if there's evidence of violence or a planned kidnapping. Second, if there's a physical handicap involved. Or third, a mental disability."

"Okay, I follow you so far."

Cohen gave me a conspiratorial look. "I read the statement you filed, and I didn't see anything that fit. Unless…maybe there's something that didn't find its way into the official report?"

I appreciated Cohen's effort. These kinds of cases were all too often left unresolved, and this department didn't get half the resources allocated to Vice or Homicide. Still, I needed to tap dance my way around what happened to Shelly. The last thing I wanted on top of everything else right now were yet more people poking their noses into things.

"The last time I saw her, Shelly mentioned that she wasn't getting enough sleep," I said truthfully. "At least, enough restful sleep."

"Hm. That's probably unpleasant, but insomnia doesn't count as a mental disability."

I thought fast. "However, she also told me that she'd taken seven or eight caffeine pills that day. I don't think that someone who's right in the head would do that if they've got insomnia."

Cohen puzzled that one out for a little bit. "That's not hard evidence, but it'll have to do. There's nothing that says one way or another about the 'suspicion' of mental illness. I'll put the report into the database."

"Thank you, Max. I appreciate it, really."

"I did want to ask you about the note that was left, if you have a minute," he added. "If Ms. Richardson wasn't putting thoughts together coherently, then maybe that explains her message. 'I can't take it anymore' is sometimes found in suicide notes, both real and faked. But the 'I need to help' phrase is odd. Did she mean 'I need help'? Or 'I need to get help'?"

I looked away for a moment. If there was one thing I knew about

Shelly, it was that she liked to help. She'd helped me and others get our feet wet when we'd arrived at the OME, she'd helped out on cases, heck, she'd even helped Bob McClatchy years ago when the man needed advice on wooing a potential romantic interest.

My mind did one of its little *clicks* and a hunch popped into my head.

"If you ask anyone in my department, they'll tell you that Shelly liked helping people," I recalled. "Maybe the note is her way of telling us that she had an irresistible compulsion to 'help' someone."

The detective's steel wool eyebrows knotted together in a mass. "I'm not sure I follow."

"I think that she got the idea in her head that she's got to go help someone else…in order to help herself." The more I thought about it, the surer I became that I was on the right track. "She was part of several church groups that helped out the poor, I know that. I'd detail someone to find out which groups, and go check each one out. I'd ask your officers to keep an ear out for new people showing up to help out at the local rehab clinics, homeless shelters, that sort of thing."

"Right," Cohen said, sounding skeptical. "Sounds like a long shot to me, but I'll take it over what we have now, which is nothing."

At that very moment, Lieutenant Luis Ollivar waddled past the cubicle on the way to Homicide. The tubby man's attention was split between the paper he held in one hand, and the cinnamon-dusted churro in the other. That was fine by me. I hadn't spoken to Ollivar since he'd flunked me on my Firearms Certification exam. I had no idea what he thought about his boss overruling his (correct) scoring and passing me, and I wasn't eager to find out.

"I take it that you and the Lieutenant aren't on the best of terms?" Cohen asked. "Not that it's my business, but that wasn't a smile I saw on your face as he went by."

I made an offhanded shrug. "It's nothing. He and I have some differing opinions on certain things around here, that's all."

"If it's about his boss, you might be interested in the latest news. Robert McClatchy, the horse that Ollie's put his money on, is deadlocked with his opponent for the top cop job."

That was a little disturbing. Becoming the Chief of the LAPD was an obsession for Bob, and it had only gotten more focused under Destry's influence. I didn't want to think about what kinds of pressure were being put on people now.

"That reminds me," I said. "While I'm here, I might as well ask for an update on a homicide case that got put on my desk."

"You know the way?" I nodded and got up. "Good luck, then. I'll keep you posted on anything we find, especially with your suggestions."

I shook Max's hand and thanked him for his work. Then I followed the same corridor Ollivar had taken down to Homicide. I'd made it maybe three-quarters of the way to Esteban's desk when I heard his voice from the meeting room off to the right. He sounded pleased, as if he'd discovered something important.

The door had been left open a crack. Through it, I saw him and Isabel Vega each hunched over a map that had been spread out on a table. Their heads were close together, not quite kissing close, but plenty close enough. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but then they shared a quiet laugh together.

My stomach took a *lurch*.

Without consciously thinking about it, I dove into the women's bathroom across the hall and let the door slam shut behind me.

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Chapter Twenty

I grabbed the sides of one of the bathroom's porcelain sinks and held on to it like a drunkard clinging to a lamp post. My stomach settled, even if something deep inside was still going *twang*. I forced myself to look in the mirror.

The same face I saw every morning stared back. The same hacker's tan complexion, the same witch's chin, the same long black hair done up in the fashionable 'brink of a nervous breakdown' look.

I couldn't believe it. Right when Andeluvia needed me. Right when my closest friend had gone missing. Here I was, feeling sick to my stomach…over a spot of jealousy?

How the hell had Fitzwilliam ever thought that I could be Dame material?

Maybe I was being foolish, chasing dreams in Andeluvia. Maybe I was re-evaluating how tenuous life was after what had happened to Vazura and Hollyhock. Vazura had never gotten a chance to be with his lover, Lady Behnaz. Even if their taste and timing had been questionable, it seemed that they had really cared for each other.

And Hollyhock?

I was still working through that one. Even with her whole life ahead of her, Holly had been blinded and ultimately destroyed by her thirst for revenge. She'd done everything with me simply to hide the fact that she was working for the enemy.

The mysterious *him*.

Esteban had made it clear that he'd wanted to make a go of things with me. And that finally brought me back to where I was. Here, in one of the LAPD women's restrooms. It wasn't jealousy so much as guilt and regret.

Had I just missed the boat with Esteban? Just as I'd missed the boat with Thea? And with Shelly?

The door opened and someone came in. Someone with a bun of tightly coiled coffee-colored hair and wearing black wire frame glasses. I jerked my chin down and stared resolutely at the sink. Then

I swiped my hands over the sensors to dispense soap and water and began washing my hands.

The water ran in the sink next to mine for a moment. Silence. The sound of the paper towel dispenser whirring away, followed by the tear, crumple, and toss of the used paper.

"Dayna? I *thought* I saw you come in here," Isabel said quietly.

I didn't look up. "Yeah, I just needed to wash up. I was on my way to see Esteban. And you. Over that tattooed body we found at the park."

"Uh-huh." The back-and-forth clack of Vega's heels on the tile floor echoed behind me. I looked up and saw her completing a quick survey of the stalls. "Looks like everyone's still out to lunch. That's good. I hate feeding the gossip machine around here."

"Me too," I said, as I waved my hands by the dispenser and got a towel of my own. "I suppose that I should–"

"There's nothing going on between me and Detective Esteban."

"I didn't think there was," I said, a bit too quickly. Vega waited until I'd thrown my paper away before she spoke again.

"I figured as much. But no one ducks into a room the way you did unless you needed to hear it."

"I…" I gave Vega a hard look, which she accepted matter-of-factly. "I guess I did. Things have been difficult between Alanzo and me. What's going on in my life is as much to blame as anything else."

"He's mentioned it in passing. And before you ask, he hasn't breathed a word about what has been keeping you two from doing more than grade school stuff. *Besos y caricias*." She grinned as she saw my expression. "That means making out, necking. Or, to be romantic about it, 'swapping spit'."

"Thanks, Isabel. I needed that, as well."

Her sunny expression dipped behind a cloud in an instant. "You need to know one more thing, then. Esteban's really confused."

"He is? I mean, over me?"

A nod. "Afraid so. And if I've learned one thing about men over the years, it's that they don't like to be confused. I guess I'm saying…I think he may be open, if someone else wants to make a move on him."

"Someone else?"

"Someone. Anyone but me, Dayna." Vega shook her head as she added, "I've been stuck doing street level cases for three years before getting my promotion, and right off the bat I get a crack at Homicide. I'm lucky to be working with Esteban, but I'm not going to jeopardize things for any *papi*, no matter how cute."

I nodded, taking a moment to digest all that I'd been told. Some of it was tough to hear, but at least it was honest. Grudgingly, I had to respect where Vega was coming from.

"I appreciate that," I said. "I mean, setting me straight about Esteban. And yes, I think you're going to do fine in Homicide."

"Well, I have my fingers crossed. It's getting easier, thanks to you."

"What do you mean?"

"That case you came up to see Esteban about? You called it down the line. The guy we found in the park had overdosed at a club up on Solano. We got confessions on tape, everything. So, with your help, I've officially 'made my bones' in Homicide."

I nodded. "You'd have cracked it even without my help. Especially the way you knew those tattoos."

She shrugged. "I had to know them. This side of L.A. is my neighborhood."

"You grew up here?"

"Here?" Isabel rolled her eyes and nodded towards the exit. "Come on, that's enough time spent powdering our noses in here."

"Agreed." I followed Vega as she pushed through the door and crossed the hall.

"My parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic when I was six," she said, as she pushed the door open to the conference room I'd seen her in at first. Esteban looked up from his work and smiled at me. "I didn't even see Los Angeles until I got into college. I grew up in San Clemente and spent half the time serving food on the beach from my Dad's taqueria."

"That's why she was assigned to a lot of robberies up on the Avenues when she joined the LAPD," Esteban said, joining the

conversation. “She understood what was going on with the neighborhood, why we had problems getting the evidence we needed.”

That made me genuinely curious. “I’m listening.”

“Turned out that the work ethic got in the way.” Vega said. “Many families up on those streets, they’re from the D.R. like my parents. A lot of them run *bodegas* – little grocery stores – and they have to keep the place running all the time to scrape by. Local street gangs used stop in and rob them so regularly, it was like pulling money from an ATM.”

“The gangs’ saving grace was that they didn’t kill anyone,” Esteban put in. “All they did was scare the store owners a bit, then duct tape them to the counter or something before they left.”

“So how did the work ethic play in?” I asked.

“Whenever the thugs left, it was back to work for the family,” Vega explained. “They’d just peel themselves free and get back to work, obliterating all the fingerprints. I got them to at least stop wiping down the glass countertops, and we started making arrests.”

“See?” Esteban said, jabbing a thumb at Isabel, “I told you she was good at her job, Dayna. Even without you around to lecture her, Vega knows how to protect a crime scene.”

That finally pried a laugh out of me. I needed it.

I needed it more than ever now.

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Chapter Twenty-One

There were owls in the rafters.

They remained nothing more than shadows perched high in the rafters of the throne room, but every now and then, something metallic gleamed in the dim light up there. Freshly polished battle talons, I was willing to bet. Their gaze on the back of my neck was as palpable as heat radiating from a cast iron stove.

I firmly thrust that image from my mind. If I focused on that, I'd never get anything done today.

Morning sun gleamed through the narrow, slitted windows along the alcoves, as well as the rosette-shaped expanse of stained glass that let the light in from above and behind the throne. Whoever designed that bit of architecture had known their stage lighting. Depending on the time of day, the King would either be wreathed in an otherworldly brilliance, or cast dramatically in shadow.

Fitzwilliam hadn't arrived yet for this morning's session of verbal pugilism. In fact, several of the higher-ranking lords were still filing in. Between the news about Thea, looking for Shelly, and the demands of my job in L.A., I hadn't had time to request that repairs be done to my chair, so I had to take matters into my own hands as best as I could.

Since yesterday, someone had kicked my chair back into its original spot in the corner. That made me grit my teeth, but it gave me some room to work. While the King was skittish about my importing technology into his kingdom, I figured that so long as I kept things unobtrusive, he wouldn't complain.

Ignoring the rude looks and the occasional 'harrumph' directed my way, I moved to kneel next to the left side of my assigned chair, turning my back to the room so I could keep my hands out of sight. Then I pulled a tube of instant adhesive glue from my inner jacket pocket.

Squeezing out a couple of drops on the surfaces I needed bonding I pressed them together. In a few more seconds I had tucked the glue

away and tested the chair's arm. It felt solid. The chair still looked decrepit, but at least it wasn't going to come apart on me.

The sound of many people's feet tromping across the stone floor made me look up. The remaining lords entered the hall, followed by the King and his usual swarm of pages. Commander Yervan, as always an impressive figure in his gold-trimmed plate, preceded the group and came over to join me.

"Dame Chrissie," he said, giving me a little bow, which I returned. "His Majesty is pleased to see that you have arrived as requested."

I stood and gave him a wry smile. "I wouldn't ignore my liege's first requests of me, Commander."

He nodded his approval, then cleared his throat as if he were embarrassed. "His Majesty has also made it clear to all concerned that you will remain sitting to the right of the throne today. The court you attended the day before last never came to order, due to the news of the Albess' death. So it did not 'count' as your first attendance."

It really didn't matter to me, given the fact that Behnaz and Ivor equally loathed my presence at court. I simply nodded and moved to grab the back of the chair. Maybe this time I could get it to make its scraping sound in a whole new key.

"And it was decided unanimously during yesterday's court that you shall always receive assistance in your seating arrangements," he quickly added. "Allow me, please."

Yervan picked up the heavy chair like it weighed nothing. I followed in his wake as he placed the chair between Fitzwilliam and Behnaz. One of the pages set up a little folding table before the King's throne. A second group of servants wearing aprons entered and began setting out crocks of butter and baskets of baguette-style loaves at strategic intervals around the table. Others set out drinks and a quartet of azure-colored bowls. Each bowl contained a gleaming pile of lumpy, off-white crystals.

The King, of course, got his own set of crock, loaf, cup, and bowl.

"This is another custom of our court, Dame Chrissie," Yervan explained, as he drew back to his position behind the throne. "Every third meeting, all the nobility present break bread and share salt

together. It gives ballast to the stomach before taking on weightier matters."

I nodded and moved to take my own seat. Before I did, I pulled another item from my world out of a handy pocket. It wasn't anything more than a thick triangle of plastic, so I doubted that Fitzwilliam would object. I took the little wedge I'd been using in my office as a doorstop and jammed it under my chair's short leg to use as a shim. Then I settled into my seat, wobble-free for the first time.

My effort didn't go unnoticed.

The King nodded in my direction. "You seem to have landed on your feet a little better today, Dame Chrissie."

"At least a little more evenly, Sire," I agreed. One of the baskets of loaves finally made it down to my end of the table. Lord Behnaz performed the same actions as the other lords further down the way, grabbing a loaf from the basket, he tore off roughly a third, and then swiped the torn end across the butter.

I darted forward as soon as the man's hands had cleared the basket. There was no way I wanted to share bread with the man, so I tore the end off an untouched loaf and brushed it across the open crock. Behnaz scowled as I did so but didn't say anything, which was fine by me.

The bread had been baked so recently that it was still warm in its fluffy white core. And while the butter looked pale enough to use for spackle, it had a fresh flavor that put anything I'd had out of a box or plastic tub to shame. I chewed happily, decided against drinking anything, and watched the curious movement of the last ingredient on the table.

The bowls of salt were shifted from individual to individual. Most every person reached into the container, grabbed a pinch, and sprinkled it on the buttered end of their bread. I noticed, however, that the bowls only went about halfway down towards the far end. I craned my neck and for the first time saw that, while knights and lords were somewhat intermingled along the table's length, lords predominated the closer you got to the king.

So that's what it means to be 'above the salt', I realized. *It's an*

Andeluvian colloquialism for achieving a certain social status. Pity about the neighbors you get up here, though.

A salt bowl had finally worked its way up towards my end. I reached out for it, only to have it nudged just out of reach by Lord Behnaz. I scowled at the man, but he ignored me and simply chewed more loudly on his bread.

For a moment I contemplated drop-kicking the man's shin, but sanity intervened. Instead I got out of my seat, inviting a couple of sniggers from the assembled lords, and snagged a small pinch of salt. I sat back, ground the crystals up in my fingers over the butter and munched on it defiantly.

"Let us bring this session of the royal court to order," Fitzwilliam announced, as he sat down the remains of a neatly buttered and salted slice on his plate. "Today we begin with matters of trade that have been relegated to the back bench for too long."

Things went better from there. I wouldn't say that it was exactly *interesting*, but it was a relief from being the center of attention – or at least nasty gossip. The details involved everything from the movement of iron ore to wagonloads of cabbages. And it turned out to be a strange combination of homeowner's association meeting, rowdy kindergarten class, and bar brawl.

"…promised that carts would go the left-way-round the northern pike…"

"…wouldn't go a quarter-furlong on the metal in those horseshoes…"

"…and a fist for your damned cabbages!" (This one was followed by a scuffle.)

"…as if my wife would take a 'royal share' of the route!"

"…your wife takes *my* 'royal share' and she *likes* it!" (This one was also followed by a scuffle, which Commander Yervan had to break up with his plate-armored fists.)

My chair didn't list as badly as a sinking ship anymore, but the lumpy cushion made me want to shift around like a restless ten-year-old. To make matters worse, Lord Behnaz had apparently learned that I hated the cologne worn by his now-deceased Air Cavalry

commander. Every few minutes he would spritz himself with the stuff, sending up a noxious cloud of cloying fragrance that smelled like bergamot mixed with rancid sweat. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to look thoughtful and composed.

My salvation came after about an hour or so of slow torture. In the middle of a mind-numbing discussion about the grading of leather and whose commoners produced the best in the land, a page with a Dutch-boy haircut stepped forth and broke into the discussion.

"Pardons all, my Lords," he announced. "A griffin wishes to enter and request a boon from His Majesty."

Fitzwilliam, whose eyes had already glazed over long ago, looked happy for a break in the tedium. He nodded, and the page returned with Grimshaw in tow. Shaw looked winded, his feathers disarrayed by a recent blustery flight, but he still projected his usual bluff hardiness.

"Your Majesty," Shaw intoned, as he spread his wings in a full bow. "News hath come that I must share with thy court's newest addition. I must ask thee a boon: release Dame Chrissie so that I may convey it within her demesne."

Fitzwilliam sighed, obviously hoping for a longer distraction from business as usual. "Granted," he said, and he nodded in my direction.

Once again, all eyes were on me as I got out of my chair, knelt to retrieve my shim, and then followed Grimshaw out the main entrance. As we walked, I caught his eye and casually flicked my finger in the direction of the ceiling. He nodded, and kept silent until we had reached the turret room and had shut the heavy wooden door behind us.

"My thanks," he said, "For reminding me that owls yet shadow us in this place."

I gave his neck a scratch, which he gladly accepted. "And you have my own thanks for getting me out of a rather boring meeting."

"I bring news, but I am unsure whether it shall help thee."

"Let's have it."

Shaw moved to lie down on one of the big black and red rugs that carpeted the room's floor. "The High Elder says that it has been over a

year since she spoke with Albess Thea. Rather, she spoke within the last fortnight with Raisah of the Noctua. The 'Anointed', as she styles herself, asked about *wyverns*."

That got my attention. "Go on."

"Raisah hadst heard rumor of a great battle near the aerie. She wished to know if the areas to the north and west of Fitzwilliam's capital were safe for her people."

"Which is right in the area where Thea was killed." I mulled that one over for a bit, but had to throw cold water on it. "Too much of a stretch. I certainly recall the battle that Raisah asked about. As for the areas north and west of here…according to Liam, that's just part of the owls' normal hunting grounds. It makes Raisah's query a prudent one, if anything."

There came a knock on the door. Before I could answer, Galen shouldered his way in. The centaur had a neatly folded bundle of cloth in his arms.

"A most exceptional morning to you both, Dayna, Grimshaw," the Wizard said, as he trotted over to the table and began to lay out his package. "I was returning from dropping off the borrowed footwear and cloak with Lady Behnaz when I ran into our very own Lord of the Pursuivant. He asked me to convey these garments to you."

Galen took a step back so that I could come up and see what he'd laid out. The first item I picked up was a long-sleeved silver garment that reminded me of a rather ritzy sweater. The knitted fabric was dense and well put together, and the sleeves ended in fur-trimmed cuffs. I next looked at the padded vest or doublet that Herald had sent me. It had a pleasing violet shade and, as Andeluvian fashion trended away from buttons, could be done up with a series of silver buckles. To top it off, I'd received a charcoal gray cloak with yet more fur-trimmings around the hood.

I held each piece up to the light and turned it back and forth before shucking my jacket and everyday top. I took a deep breath, as if I were diving into cold water, and shrugged my way into the sweater.

It fit beautifully. So did the other two items of clothing. Galen

produced a large hand mirror from one if his myriad pockets and held it up for me, allowing me to get a decent look at myself. Yes, this was no time to be playing fashionista, even for a tiny bit. But I'd be lying if I didn't say that the new clothes looked pretty good. I was ready to step onto the stage of whatever medieval or fantasy epic was filming down on the Hollywood lots, by my estimation. At least, if they shot me from the waist up. The jeans and modern day hiking boots would probably have broken the illusion.

"Thou looks properly Andeluvian for the first time," Shaw observed, with a leonine chortle.

"It does look pretty keen," I admitted. "But the important thing is: it'll keep me warm."

"That is good, for today is the best time to fly to Sir Talish's estate," Galen said. "While I have no new information from the court, I just received a message from Protector Liam that he is ready to meet you there."

"And we know the owls will be watching for us," I said grimly. "Let's go, Shaw. I want to see exactly how the Albess met her end."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Grimshaw circled a large clearing that was equal parts blue, green, and brown. The blue came from the reflection of the sky in a little pond, the green from the pines that made up the bulk of the forest eaves, and the brown from the skeletal stalks of long-dead rows of sunflowers. The griffin selected a spot close to the edge of the pond and came in for a feather-soft landing.

I slipped off Shaw's back gracefully, now that I'd had a decent amount of practice from my time with his people. I did a couple of deep knee bends to restore circulation in my legs, but that was due more to the long flight than the cold. Though my lips felt a little chapped, the clothing that Herald had tailor-made for me did its job and kept me comfortably warm.

Two cervine figures appeared silently at the forest's edge. I recognized Liam's mismatched brown and green eyes immediately. The other, a huskier stag with a chest full of rust-red fur, followed in his wake.

Liam and his companion made a bow in that uniquely deer like, adorable way that only the fayleene could pull off. The huskier stag looked unsure and awkward about our presence, but Liam was confident and aglow with excitement.

"Ardan," Liam began proudly. "Allow me to introduce you to Dame Dayna Chrissie, and Grimshaw of the Reykajar aerie. They normally go by 'Dayna', and 'Shaw'. Dayna, Shaw, allow me to introduce Ardan, the very first of my Rangers."

"I am honored to meet you," Ardan said, in a similarly Gaelic-tinged voice. "I do not know either of you personally, but I witnessed how you both helped escort my people to their new home in the Grove of the Willows."

Shaw returned the bow in his gruff manner. I shook my head in wonderment as I said, "And the honor is ours, Ardan. But I've never heard of a fayleene 'ranger' before!"

"That's because none have existed before," Liam informed me.

“Thanks to you, Galen, and Shaw, I’ve gotten to see realms far different than the Fayleene Woods, and I realized my people’s ways could use some updating.”

Shaw looked puzzled. “What dost thou mean?”

“Consider the disaster that took place at the aerie only recently. Many of the griffin’s rulers were killed or wounded. But did their leadership come to an end?” Shaw shook his head, and Liam went on. “We fayleene have always relied upon one mystical figure – the Protector – and that’s our vulnerable point.”

“But thou art well protected by magic, correct?”

“Yes, I am. However, if anyone does kill the Protector…witness what happened to my predecessor. Our entire world came to a halt, unable to respond to the oncoming crisis of Sirrahon, until I was selected. That simply won’t work in times like these.”

“So Ardan is your backup?” I ventured. “You’re grooming him to take your place, just in case anything happens to you?”

“Not quite. He’s *one* of my backups.”

Now that both surprised and impressed me. “Seriously?”

“Serious as Sirrahon was,” Liam said, with a princely laugh. “I’ve selected a group of young stags and does to train in the arts of fey magic. All fayleene know these ways, of course, but not with all the powers that the Protectorship bestows. Even I am only starting to relearn some of them.”

“Relearn? That implies that those powers have been lost.”

Liam nodded sagely. “Quinval was assassinated before he selected his predecessor. It’s likely that centuries of lore and knowledge perished with him – and all because he never thought to pass on the fayleene birthright of magic to others before the ‘Old War’ flared up again.”

Shaw made an appreciative growl. “Thou art of greater intellect than I thought at first.”

“There is an added bonus,” Liam continued. “I wish to continue my association with you, Dayna. And Galen. Even with one as primitive as Shaw, believe it or not. This shall free me to do so and not leave my people without protection.”

“Best we keep this private knowledge,” Shaw said quickly. “I hear wing beats. Thy friends from the Noctua approach.”

A griffin’s senses were above reproach, and even with their silent flight, Shaw nodded towards the treetops to the north where a trio of owls winged their way towards us. Two were large and butterscotch in color, while one was smaller and mottled in the more common mixture of brown, white, and black.

Xandra, Nix, and Nox settled on a branch high overhead. The Parliamentarian appeared anxious and put-upon. By contrast, the Gruesome Twosome, as I now thought of the pair of Noctua, looked every bit as haughty and untouchable as before.

“One wishes to convey sympathies most great,” Xandra said politely. “It is this one’s heavy responsibility to recount the events of the Albess’ demise.”

“Time out,” I objected. “I mean, hold on a minute. It may be one’s ‘responsibility’ to recount the events. But I need to hear the story from one who actually *witnessed* the events.”

Xandra shifted from foot to foot at that. She clacked her beak several times as she looked at her companions helplessly. Finally, the Noctua with the dot of black by his eye spoke.

“This one and his brother were stationed in the trees nearby,” Nox said curtly. “The Albess had stopped by the pool to drink, for one’s beak gets parched on the wing. The scaled one came up from the south without warning, save for a slithering sound on the wind, and pounced upon the Albess. One witnessed a swallow like a fish going down the throat of a griffin, and it was done.”

“That’s it?” I asked. “Didn’t you two…I don’t know, actually *do* anything? I mean, I have it on good authority that you’re both ‘invincible’.”

Nox actually looked baffled. “One’s anointed leader was dead. Taking another life would be senseless, when there would be nothing to gain but more death.”

Shaw, Liam, and I traded looks. This time Shaw spoke up. “Didst thou say how many attackers there were?”

“One did say. A single wyvern is all this one saw.”

I kicked at the hard ground with my boot. The grass was brown and dry as tinder. “Okay. We’re just going to look around a little bit. I can’t keep you from leaving, but if you can stay, I might have more questions.”

All I got was a chilly glare in reply.

I did a quick three-hundred-and-sixty-degree visual sweep to orient myself. The three owls sat atop the tallest tree almost due north of us, at what I’d call twelve o’clock. The forest itself took up space from nine to two. The pond was at seven or eight, while the rest of the clock face was made up of the brown sunflower fields that Sir Talish’s people harvested during the late summer months.

Shaw wandered over to the edge of the pond, dipped his beak, and began to take a drink. Liam nodded to Arden, and the rust-chested stag went off to survey the nine-o’clock spot of the forest, while Liam went the opposite direction. I went off to join Shaw as the griffin continued to drink. I frowned as I looked due south.

“What dost thou see that blocks thy view of the sky that way?” Shaw murmured, as clear, cold water dripped from his black beak.

“I don’t see anything but the remains of more sunflower fields,” I said. The fallen mess of brown stalks was dense, but it only came up to my shoulder.

“‘Tis sadly true. The Albess may have been deep in thought, head down to drink. But her so-called ‘guards’ should have seen a wyvern approach from far off.”

I chewed my lip. “Incompetence? Or something more purposeful?”

“Whichever it is, mine own mind suspects a falsehood lies at the core of it. For wyverns do not hunt alone. Nay, they hunt in packs or great swarms, as thou hast seen.”

Liam had wandered the edge of the field, pausing every now and then to take a grazing bite of the dry grass. Then Arden called to him, and the Fayleene Protector joined his protégé in the shadow of the trees. They conferred for a moment, then Liam slowly trotted over to us, still chewing away like a cow on its cud. One of the brown grass stems hung from the corner of his mouth.

“Must thou have lunch at a time such as this?” Shaw asked his

friend. “Art thou making fun of mine own appetite?”

“Neither,” Liam said quietly, out of the side of his mouth. He tilted his head slightly away from me. “Dayna, take this stem I hold and see if you smell what I taste.”

I plucked the dry piece of fibrous grass from Liam’s grip. It felt surprisingly slick. I turned away so that the owls could not see my motion, raised it to my nose, and sniffed.

Again, I came away with a spoor of sulfur. This stem looked like grass, but it smelled like a freshly dipped match. I said as much to Liam, who nodded.

“And the shiny slickness,” I said, rubbing my fingers along the edge. “Could it be…paint? Some kind of vegetable dye?”

“It tastes like the residue of a plant I know which can stain one’s tongue brown,” Liam agreed.

So we had the smell of sulfur. And stain to turn something brown. I looked around and noticed how everything around had turned the exact same color as autumn slouched towards the start of winter.

What if the grass had been singed by fire? What kind of flame left the smell of sulfur in its wake? I’d smelled something sulfurous like this more than once before.

Abruptly, my mind went *click*.

Dragon breath.

A small or medium-sized dragon had burned the grass here. And then someone had dyed it to hide the evidence of a dragon attack.

“Keep your expressions neutral, or at least bored,” I murmured. “I’m thinking that someone had Thea murdered, and they used a dragon to do the deed. It’s the only scenario that fits.”

“Then why place blame upon the wyverns?” Shaw said after a moment. “T’would be simpler to say that a dragon did it, in any case!”

“Definitely, there is deception afoot,” Liam said. In a tone just above a whisper, he added, “Just as you asked us to appear unconcerned a second ago, I must ask you both to look frightened and concerned in the next minute.”

“Needs I must take acting classes,” Shaw grumbled, but he and I nodded agreement.

Ardan had vanished. The wind picked up a little, jostling the branches of the trees, then a moaning began to emanate from deep inside the wood. Finally, it was followed by a goosepimply *slithering* sound.

Goosepimply, because that's exactly what my skin did. It sounded just like a wyvern as it slid along a slot canyon wall. Or between the trees. And it was coming closer.

The three owls leapt from their perch. Xandra fluttered into the air and dove for cover into yet another stand of trees. The Gruesome Twosome came to hover before us for a second.

"What is that horrible sound?" I asked fearfully. To help sell my fright, I made sure that they saw my hands shaking.

"What is happening?" Shaw demanded, in somewhat less than frightened manner. I guess that was the best he could do. "Must I fight, or flee?"

"One senses that another foe approaches," Nix hissed. "This foe is beyond ones who crawl upon the ground like insects. The griffin must either help ones as such flee, or stand guard."

"Now thou wouldst tell me my business," Shaw griped.

"One's business is one's own. Ours is to track. And to kill."

With that, the pair rocketed into the sky, their wingbeats carrying them aloft at a speed that a griffin would find dizzying. They banked to one side, pirouetting on bright yellow wing tips, and then dove back towards the forest. They skimmed the treetops and vanished. The slithering and moaning faded into the distance.

"One of the skills I have taught Arden," Liam said smugly, "Is how to use the woods themselves to create sounds that lure and confuse others. I'm surprised that we had to apply the lesson so soon, but he's learned it well."

I frowned. "That's good, but why go to the trouble of drawing the Noctua away from here?"

"Because the Noctua do not hunt in my people's woods. The Parliamentarians do. Our species have worked out a series of clacks with beak or hoof to call for help."

It all became clear to me now. I'd heard Xandra make the clacks.

And even as I realized that, she emerged from her stand of trees and came to land before us.

"Dayna, one must make a request," Xandra breathed, her voice sounding like a nun who'd just run a hard sprint. "One must ask to meet at the sacred Grove of the Willows, as the moon rises this night."

I hesitated. Dammit, I needed to be back in my world to get news about Shelly's disappearance, if there was any!

Xandra saw my vacillation. Trembling, she spread her wings and threw her body face down on the hard dirt. "One begs for mercy, she-from-another-world! There is one among my kind who shall perish in darkness without her compassion! One must meet tonight, else there may be no reason to ever meet again!"

One among my kind who shall perish in darkness…

Hope burst to life in my chest like a lit firecracker. *Could she mean Albess Thea?*

"I'll be there, I promise," I said.

Xandra levered herself back up. She shot me a last fearful look and then took off into the rapidly purpling sky.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

I've eaten plenty of vegan cuisine, but I was more than a little leery of fayleene food.

Back when I'd first accompanied Liam to the original Sacred Grove in the Fayleene Woods, I'd eaten grass, bark, and leaves with him while in fayleene form. The food was incredibly tasty, but it had turned my poor human stomach definitively *urpy*. Therefore, I took a long, cautious look at the stuff that the fayleene does brought me. Shaw was doing even worse. The fayleene had placed a plate of seeds for me on the lion-sized stone table at the center of the grove. As for the griffin, they'd simply dumped a large chunk of fallen tree in front of him on the ground.

"I know that you are unfamiliar with this fare in your current form," Liam said quietly, as he bid the fayleene servers to leave us be. "But I assure you, these are all edible. Dayna, I made sure to have you served ginger grass seeds and the nut of winter holly."

"And what of I?" Shaw asked, prodding at the hunk of tree with a talon.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll figure it out, Shaw," Liam chuckled.

I popped a handful of seeds and winter holly in my mouth and gave it a careful chew. Actually, it wasn't bad. If anything, it felt and tasted like munching on the half-popped kernels at the bottom of a batch of popcorn – what my mom would have called the 'Old Maids'.

Shaw continued to sullenly bat the wood between his front paws. As he turned it over for the third or fourth time, a fat gray grub the size of my thumb fell out. The griffin snatched it up and swallowed it like a kid eating a gummy candy. His eyes lit up with delight. Using his talons, he systematically shredded the wood, slurping up the slug-like larvae with relish.

I sighed, faced resolutely away, and finished off my bowl.

The purple of dusk began to fade into the black of night. Though my new clothing kept me warm, I ended up pacing back and forth, breathing into my hands. It was a cloudless night, and yet the

atmosphere still had the curiously heavy smell that said the first snow of the season was on the way. The moon began to rise over the treetops when I caught a glimpse of an owl-shaped shadow coming in for a landing.

The shadow resolved itself into Xandra, as she skidded to a halt atop the stone tabletop. She looked around, blinked owlishly, and let out a pleased 'hoo!' when she saw I was there.

"Quickly, quickly," she said, with a bob of her head. "Follow in this one's wake, fly low where this one does, and land where this one lands."

"Wait a minute," I growled. "I want to know what this is all about."

"Talk is for later! One must make haste!"

With that, she took off again in a flurry of wingbeats. I hurriedly slipped into Shaw's saddle and the griffin heaved his body into the air. Below, Liam quickly faded into the shadows of the grove.

"Good luck!" I heard him call.

Any qualms I might have had about Shaw flying at night vanished as we cleared the treetops. The moon was only a sliver off full, and it cast milky white moonlight across the clear night sky like a halogen lamp. Shaw circled to find Xandra's shadow flitting off towards the north, and he sped after her.

The Grove of the Willows wasn't a large forest, at least in the grand scheme of things, but it did run a fair distance north. We flew on for at least twenty minutes before the trees finally began to fail. Xandra then veered off sharply to the east, then north, then east again.

"Canst she not make up her mind?" Shaw complained under his breath.

"She's got her reasons," I disagreed. "Something tells me that we better mimic her moves as much as we can."

Xandra continued her zig-zagging course north and east. The trees fell away, to be replaced by broad, rolling hills covered in fallow fields and orchards. Eventually the signs of cultivation faded away, to be replaced by open wilderness.

Still later, the hills began to crumple and rear into higher,

narrower folds. The air took on a sharper bite and stands of scraggly fir and pine began to appear. Xandra flew lower now, just skimming the treetops. Shaw followed suit, and my senses were filled with the dim, heady scent of evergreen.

Finally, the hills reared themselves into a wall of sheer cliffs. Xandra banked to her left, paralleling the cliff face, drawing us after her only a few feet from a solid wall of blue granite. Shaw slowed, though his wings ceased to beat and he was able to hold himself steady in his descent.

"'Tis quite an updraft here," he explained, and I simply nodded.

Xandra sped on ahead, a little black splotch in the glow of the moon's light. Suddenly she flared her wings and came to a stop. I strained my eyes, finally making out a six-foot wide abutment jutting out from the cliff face. It was plenty of space for a human being to walk on without a problem, but when that human was riding a considerably wider griffin, things were going to get complicated.

"Hang on to my saddle, Dayna," Shaw warned. "Thou shalt get jostled."

I did so, not understanding what Shaw was about to do. The griffin drew within a dozen feet above and to the side of the jutting section of cliff face. His right wingtip nearly brushed the rough rock wall. Abruptly, Shaw brought his wings in at the same time.

We plummeted like a stone.

I swallowed my scream as we fell. Shaw landed with a grunt atop the narrow ledge, his legs spread and joints slightly bent to take the impact. His talons made a *skree* as they dug in, anchoring the griffin firmly to the rock.

"I would advise thee to get off on the right," he said. I turned to the left and looked down. A tumble of broken rock and thorny underbrush lay far, far below.

I got off on the right.

"You sure you'll be okay?" I asked.

"Thy concern is misplaced. I am quite comfortable," Shaw assured me. "I cannot move much, 'tis true, but I shall wait for thee as long as needed."

Xandra stood nearby, her agitation only growing greater by the second.

“One must follow!” she urged me. I still worried about where the heck I was being led, though, not willing to simply blindly trust.

“Where? Where must I follow you?”

“To where one such as yourself is needed. Please, one must hurry before it is too late!”

I followed Xandra along the cliff face, which curved around sharply until it ended in a broad oval-shaped opening the size of the door on my garage back in Los Angeles. The opening had been carved or enlarged from a spot directly below an overhang, protecting it from sun and rain. Dim light emanated from within, and I felt warmer air billowing out soundlessly into the night from it.

Three or four other owls were perched there. All were the Parliamentarian-types of owls, and while they looked at me with obvious interest and curiosity, none were startled by my appearance. Xandra indicated with an outstretched wing where I could throw a leg over the edge of the opening and climb inside.

This was now or never, so I put my foot down. “I’m not going any further, Xandra. Not until you tell me what is going on, and where you are taking me!”

The owls perched in the opening traded looks with each other, murmuring in alarm.

Xandra spoke, reluctantly. “One of the Hoohan is dying. This one needs you before the night is out, else there is no purpose to the otherworldly coming.”

I chewed my lip anxiously. “I’m not a doctor. If you wanted healing, I could have asked for a spell, or at least brought my first aid kit–”

“Healing is not needed. Death is inevitable for the one you must see.” Xandra looked up at me, as miserable as an owl could possibly look, and added, “One merely asks for your aid. To help one who is held dear. Perhaps to bring a single sunrise to a life filled with fog and cloud.”

I had to ask the question that had been gnawing at me the entire

time.

"Are you bringing me to the Albess?"

"Nay, nay! The owlet whose sight shall soon gaze upon nothing is of this one's own clutch of eggs."

Xandra had a sick child? That alone rocked me.

"If it helps she-from-another-world, a common link exists," Xandra went on. "The child has the same addlements and illnesses, what we Hoohan call the 'Marks of the Anointed', as the Albess. These addlements are such where only one such as you can provide comfort."

I still didn't know what Xandra meant. But if there was something I could do to help a sick child, I wasn't about to hesitate. So I nodded, then hefted myself over the lip of the opening into the owls' hidden world.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

When I'd first visited the Andeluvian Parliament, the first thing that had struck me was the smell: parchment and pastry. Here, it was the sound. The light rush of air, the patter of dripping water, and the distant, utterly unexpected sound of a *choir*.

Was I hearing things?

I stopped for a moment to check. Also, it was dim inside the owl's quarters, and my eyes needed time to adjust. To my astonishment, where the moonlight ended, the cavern I stood inside was lit by the steady, powder-blue phosphorescence of a mossy lichen covering the walls. And the choir? Not only did I hear it, I could almost *understand* it.

Quem quaerimus adjutorem…

Media vita in morte sumus…

This rocked me to my core. I'd heard blatty trumpet calls and polka-esque tunes from Fitzwilliam's court musicians. And I'd listened to the droning *ohhhmmmmm* of the fayleene's Lead Does during their ceremony to choose the next Protector of the Forest. But this? This sounded just like Latin chants sung by a brotherhood of Benedictine monks.

Xandra perched atop a nearby ledge, looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and urgency. "One sees marvel and appreciation for the music of the Hoohan."

"I just didn't…I mean…" I stuttered. "Back on my world, owls don't sing."

"Here in the Roost of the Star Child, all dwellings are placed so that one and all may hear the music of peace at any time of day. Were events different, one would be welcome to meditate with us. But now, we must go."

Xandra led the way, fluttering from perch to perch down a winding corridor that led deeper inside. She set a rapid pace that kept me almost in a constant jog.

Still, I glimpsed sights in the dim light that stirred my sense of

intrigue and wonder.

The Hoohan of this 'Roost' lived in individual stone chambers, much like cells in a honeycomb or rooms in a monastery. Each chamber's opening was a flattened oval like the one at the cavern entrance, allowing room for a family to perch on their front door. Patterns or Latinate words were scratched on the walls over the glowing mats of lichen, though I could only guess if they were announcements, street signs, or owlish graffiti.

The corridors were two stories high, and just wide enough to permit a Hoohan to fly unimpeded, with wings outstretched, for the entire length. The air was cool, moist, and completely without odor. It was a far cry from the feel of the supersized caverns and salt-tanged air in the griffin aerie.

Xandra brought me to an opening in the wall that was different than the others. The oval space had been sealed off by a wooden door. For some reason, that filled me with a sense of foreboding. A tall, brooding Parliamentarian stood guard over it, one with a distinctly male look about his heavy brow.

"This is Dayna, she-from-another-world," Xandra said, introducing us. "Dayna, this is Orestes, one's mate and the sire of this one's clutch."

I nodded in greeting. Orestes frowned disapprovingly at my presence but did not speak.

"One asks she-from-another-world to bide but a moment," she said, and using her beak, she pressed a lever to open the door latch.

The door swung inwards wide enough to admit her entry. She disappeared inside, and I watched her shadow on the wall move jerkily against the flicker of a new light source. I heard talking, and then Xandra reappeared.

She fluttered up to a perch just outside the doorway, and then indicated the way inside with an outstretched wing. "One begs you to enter, and spend only a few minutes of one's life to give comfort and company that others cannot."

I swallowed hard and put my hand to the door. The wood felt smooth and slick. "This would be your offspring that I would be

speaking to?"

"It is pleasure such as is rarely experienced to introduce him as this one's youngest son," Xandra said, aquiver with anticipation. "This one's son is named Perrin, and his waiting for you has been as bittersweet as the biting of a tart fruit."

I opened the door just enough to slip inside and then closed it behind me. The chamber inside was about the size of my bedroom, and just tall enough so that I could stand. The illumination came from a pile of glowing stones set in one corner. I didn't know what they were, but they put out a happy, dancing yellow light and enough warmth to drive back the cool damp of the caves.

Piles of books and scrolls lined one wall, stacked in no order I could fathom along crude shelves made of flagstone-shaped chunks of rock. Shallow clay bowls of water and untouched food lay next to a raised platform crafted from woven reeds and soft cloth.

Swaddled inside the folds of cloth was a little owl, no larger than an adult chicken and a lot scrawnier. Perrin looked as if half his body weight was taken up by his large head and inquisitive golden eyes. But what grabbed and held my attention was his plumage. It was sparse and tattered looking, and it didn't have the mottled brown-black of his parents or the other Parliamentarians. It was closer to the butterscotch yellow of the Noctua, but that wasn't quite right. His feathers were the shade of orange sherbet mixed with ice milk.

In other words, his coloration was the same as Albess Thea's.

"Oh, hello," Perrin said, in the faint, sweet voice of a little boy. "You must be the kindly monster that my parents keep talking about."

Kindly monster? I wasn't offended so much as surprised. And to an owl, I probably did look pretty strange. Certainly, the griffins had thought the human body was an oddball thing. I had to choke down a laugh at the sheer absurdity of the situation.

"Um, yes, I…I guess I'm your kindly neighborhood monster," I said. That sounded a little too flip to my ears, so I quickly added, "You can call me Dayna, if you wish. Your mom, Xandra, asked me to talk to you."

Perrin cocked his head at me for a moment. He blinked in

astonishment, as if surprised that I'd actually spoken back. "I'd really, really like to talk with you, Dayna. You are so very tall, though. Are all monsters as tall as you?"

"Well, no. I mean, some of us are taller, some are smaller." I abruptly realized that given our relative sizes, it did look as if I was monstrously tall. I knelt and sort of scooted over in Perrin's general direction. "Is this any better?"

He nodded, not taking his eyes off me. "Uh-huh. Wow. I don't think you monsters are as weird as my parents say you are. The black stuff like fine feathers on your head…it's really pretty."

"Thank you. Some monsters – I mean, humans – think so too."

"I hope you're not mad at me for calling you a monster," Perrin whispered. He let out a tiny cough and added, "It's just how my parents like to tell me about the world out there. Like everything's from one of the long-ago stories in my books. They have to tell me, because I'm too weak to go outside anymore. They think it's the only way I can understand things, but I know better."

My heart gave a twang at that, but I tried to keep things positive. "You're a smart kid, Perrin. Smart owlet, that is."

"Pretty smart. I understand why I'm here, you know."

Perrin craned his neck to look over my shoulder. He saw the door was still closed, and then motioned weakly with his wing: *come closer*. I shifted position so that I sat right next to his little raised nest. Now I could hear the wheezy sound of his breathing.

He whispered, "I'm here because I'm broken. And they don't know how to fix me."

I didn't know what I could say to that. I jumped to the reflexive, positive thing to say, and it sounded flat even to my ears. "I'm sure they're trying their best–"

"They are. I know that. But I keep getting weaker, I can't even eat anymore, and all our healers have been trying for the past year and more." He gave me the most serious look I've ever seen on a child's face, and it didn't matter that he was of a different species. "I know what is coming. Some of the Noctua say I might come back as Anointed again, but I don't know. What do you think will happen to

me? I mean, after I'm finally gone?"

Perrin spoke so calmly of his end. It threatened to break the dam of emotion that had started to well up within me. "I…I don't know, honestly. Some people I know say that we come back again, sure. Some say we go to a paradise, at least if we were good. Others say that we just stop. That there's nothing at the end. Just…the end."

"I think that's weird. That it would just 'end' like that. What would all the point be, then? Of being alive in the first place?"

"I wish I knew," I said. "I'd like to think that there is a point. It's why I try very hard to protect and care for my friends, my family…"

"And you do care, I can tell. You are kind." He looked up at me, grimacing as he shifted in his nest. "So can I ask a favor?"

I had absolutely no idea what Perrin was going to ask of me. But I could hardly turn down any request he might have. So I nodded, afraid to speak, and listened to what he said next.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Perrin's eyes glazed for a moment with pain. He waited, his breath coming in short, quick pants, and the moment finally passed. The owlet then leaned forward and spoke again in his little boy voice.

"Would you put your hand on me? I've never been touched by a monster before."

Slowly I put my monster hand out and gently stroked him from his head down towards the feathers on his back. A satisfied burble of sounds came from his beak. I did my best to be gentle. The young owl felt like a bundle of sticks wrapped in a thin coat of feathers. Under his ratty plumes, I felt nothing but solid angles and knobs of bone, as if his flesh had melted away. If I clenched my hand into a fist, he would crumple under my grasp like a fistful of feathery tin foil.

"That feels so nice," he sighed. "Everyone but my parents and the healers have always been afraid to touch me. They were always afraid my madness could jump to them. Like fleas or lice."

That puzzled me. "Madness?"

Perrin nodded miserably. "That's really how I'm sick, you know. My body's giving out now. But my mind…it's always been this way. They can't understand me. Not really. And I can't understand well right back. My head hurts when I try. That's why my parents talked about asking you, 'she-from-another-world', to come. It's so good they did that. To get you to meet me here, at my end. To know that someone has the same madness as I do. I feel…less alone."

My puzzlement vanished as everything fell into place. The dam holding back my emotions began to crack. My eyes burned and I fought desperately to hold back the tears as I finally understood.

Perrin had the same 'affliction' as me. The same one as Thea.

When he spoke, he freely used the word 'I'.

I'd thought that the Parliamentarians had some strange cultural reason for avoiding that simple word. That the Albess had somehow taught herself the trick of speaking to humans and other creatures so that she could make her people's wishes known. But now I knew. The

Hoohan weren't abiding by some oddball tradition. This was how their brains were wired, from birth. Thea hadn't figured out how to communicate with humans for the sake of the owls. She'd first had to figure out how to talk with *her fellow owls*, and somehow had been promoted to deal with humans as the Albess.

That realization finally burst the dam inside of me. Perrin had been isolated for all his short life, stranded all alone while in the middle of his flock simply because he knew no other way to express himself. That sort of social isolation bred a special kind of despair. It bred a special kind of insanity, one that could twist and annihilate a soul.

In the end, that's what had destroyed Holly. I'd always wondered if there was anything I could have done to save her. To block the road she'd chosen to travel. Now I knew. There had been no hope, no chance, from the day she or poor Perrin had been hatched. They had been damned to an isolation as complete as if they'd been exiled to the moon.

Perrin stretched out a quivering wing tip. He touched my chin, lifted it slightly so that he could see my face. Tears ran down my cheeks, so hot it felt as if they would turn to steam.

"Who are you crying for?" he asked quietly.

"For you," I choked out. "For me, I guess. And for a griffin I know. Knew. She had a…a madness, I guess. Just for being born the wrong way."

"Will you tell me about her? Please?"

"I don't know if I should," I confessed, as I wiped my eyes with my sleeve. "It's not a story for…I mean, it doesn't end happily. For her, I mean."

He snapped his beak with a faint *clack*. "I still want to hear it."

So I told him.

I don't remember what I said, exactly. But the owlet sat perfectly quiet and still, as patient as small feathered stone. I told him about my visit to the aerie, my first meeting with Hollyhock, how I got to know her, even our final confrontation in the Lair of the Elders. I know I shed a few more tears after I stumbled, brokenly, to the end of my

story.

"And so it still hurts," I sighed. "It hurt to see Holly in so much pain at the end. It hurt that she was never truly a friend. That she'd lied to me the entire time."

Perrin shifted uncomfortably and then looked me in the eye as he said, "I think you're wrong."

That made me pause. "About what?"

"About Holly not being your friend. About her lying the entire time."

"I just told you all about that, Perrin. She was just manipulating me, shadowing me on behalf of–"

"No, Dayna. That wasn't it, not all of it."

I let out a shaky breath. "What do you mean?"

"She may not have told you everything she was doing, sure. But she didn't hold back her feelings."

"I…"

"She shared all her secrets with you, didn't she? I mean, about doing something for love. About trying to build a family. About how hard her life had been." He coughed again a couple of times, gasped, and went on. "And she listened to you. Tried to understand you. She knew you enough to say 'you didn't bluff'."

"But I told you," I protested feebly, "what happened in the Lair of the Elders."

"You said that she sounded sad. When Holly said you were both alike. Don't you see? She didn't *want* to hurt you."

He had a point. And…Holly had refused to hurt me before. The mysterious 'him' had been forced to send Ironwood to try and murder me in the night, before anyone realized that Shaw was there keeping an eye on me.

The kid's right, I thought. Suddenly, a frosty knot of hurt unkinked itself deep inside of me, to be replaced by delicious warmth. *Holly had only moved against me when she had run out of choices, and even that had hurt. Shaw's daughter had valued my friendship with her. It hadn't all been an act.*

A few more tears forced themselves to the surface. I wiped them

away, and found myself – of all the darnedest things! – actually smiling at the very same time. I took a shuddering breath as I rested my hand on the owlet's emaciated body.

"You're a marvel," I said. "I came to help you. And you ended up helping me even more."

"Did I?" He beamed. "Then maybe you can help me just one more time?"

"Anything, Perrin. I owe you so much."

"I don't have much time left," he sighed. "I'm okay with it, now that I've met you. But…what can I do for my parents?"

I took a deep, shuddering breath. "I think…that the best thing would be to bring them joy. As much as you can, for as long as you can. You're not 'mad', you know. You just got the wrong brain for the wrong body."

Perrin chuckled, at least until another coughing fit overtook him. But he looked happier than ever as he said, "I don't know…I kinda like being 'mad' now. It's like you and I have this private language. Oh, if I only could have had you as a friend to talk to around the other owlets! We'd have driven *them* mad!"

"I bet we would have," I agreed. "Want me to let your parents in now?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Now I know what to do."

I got up and knocked gently on the inside of the door. It swung open, and both Orestes and Xandra flitted inside.

"One was concerned," Orestes said, in a gruff voice. "For she-from-another world is a strange choice to bring into our roost."

"One must show respect to our guest," Xandra quickly insisted. "She-from-another-world has come through many dangers to meet one's offspring."

"I'm glad you both trusted me enough to let me do this," I said humbly. "I think Perrin wants to speak with you now."

I moved out of the way and the two owls came to the side of Perrin's nest. The owlet had struggled to perch on the edge. He spoke in the same frail voice, but this time it was tinged with warmth and excitement.

“One would like to express his thanks,” he announced. “She-from-another-world has shown me what one must do for one’s own parents. And that is to tell them how much happiness and love one feels for them.”

A gasp of joy came from Xandra’s beak.

She and her mate unfurled their wings. They came together and brought Perrin into their little circle of warmth.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Saturday night in the hills above Los Angeles.

Saturday night with Esteban.

It may have been November, but Southern California was unseasonably toasty and humid. The air felt as warm and slick as bath water. I luxuriated in it after chill autumn of Andeluvia.

I'd emerged from the Roost of the Star Child humbled by my experience. Then I'd tumbled into bed immediately after returning home and checking for any messages about Shelly. There hadn't been any.

And yet somehow, after my visit with Xandra's son, I felt like there might be some hope left. That maybe all my judgement calls weren't suspect. Either way, after the evening with him I felt completely drained. I slept in, only getting up to slap together something together for brunch once I'd gotten a text from the genetics lab.

The sample of the Albess' horn feather hadn't told me much. The lab confirmed that the sample had come from a female Great Horned Owl of advanced age, and that was about it. I didn't have any prior tissue samples from Thea to match it against, so that was about as far as I could go.

I got my lazy bones moving. Then I forced myself to stop checking the phone every ten minutes so I could get ready for my date with Alanzo.

So far, the evening had gone swimmingly.

Esteban picked me up early that evening in his newly restored convertible, a '67 Plymouth Barracuda. The car's finished paint job sported a black-ice shine, gleaming wickedly in the late afternoon sun. Esteban and I had gone out in the 'Cuda when it was still in mid-restoration, and up until now I associated the car with the raw smell of paint primer.

Dinner had been at a place down in Westwood that did *teppanyaki*, the kind of Japanese cuisine that involved a sizzling-hot griddle and a

whole bunch of knife juggling. A pile of fried rice, cubed chicken and shrimp, and a whole lot of ponzu chili sauce later, I was in heaven.

And to my pleasant surprise, I found myself enjoying Esteban's company even more than I expected. We laughed, we talked, we joked with each other with a freedom I hadn't felt since the first time we'd gone out. I had Perrin to thank for that, in an odd way.

The little owlet had shown me that I could trust my instincts a little more when it came to people. That I could risk friendship. That maybe I could even risk learning to love someone.

After dinner talk had let to an exhilarating top-down drive up the steep, winding curves of Mullholland Drive. Far below, the lights of the city stretched away below us like the starscape of a far-off galaxy. I wanted to drink it all in, the neon and the Hollywood spotlights and the glow of life being lived by millions of people.

The lookout spot, which was probably Southern California's worst-kept-secret when it came to a 'Lover's Lane', had people parked on either side of us. Judging on the moist sounds come from a couple of the cars, some people were doing a lot more than just admiring the view.

I wasn't one to criticize. We were only a few degrees down my newly-christened Dayna Chrissie Scale of Friskiness, patent definitely still pending.

Esteban's lips were hot on mine. One of his arms curled protectively about my shoulders, drawing me in, making me feel wanted and protected. His other hand rested on my thigh, a heavy warm weight that was ripe with promise.

I ran my hands over the hard muscle of his chest, leaned into his kisses, felt the parting of his lips and the first electric touch of his tongue on mine. Now it was getting good. My tongue did a wet little dance around his, making his heart beat so strongly that I felt it pound against the palm of my hand.

He shifted in his seat with a painful little grunt, and I broke our kiss.

"Are you all right?" I asked playfully. "You're not getting a cramp anywhere important, are you?"

“Nah, I’m just fine,” he said, embarrassed. “Just need to move my arm a bit.”

I leaned forward a bit so he could extract his arm from behind my neck. I missed the reassuring warmth, but he really did seem to be in pain. Esteban grasped his right bicep with his left hand, roughly massaging it.

He grimaced. “Didn’t mean to alarm you. I pulled a muscle while lifting yesterday.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “You sure you don’t want me to rub it?”

“There’s lots of places I’d like you to rub,” he said, with a glint in his eye. But he nodded in my direction and changed the subject. “That’s new. That second pendant, I mean. Where did you get it?”

Without thinking about it, my hand went to the chain around my neck. Esteban was used to seeing the silver medallion that Galen had enchanted with my multiple-use transportation spell. But next to it now hung a locket in the shape of an exotic flower or seashell.

“It’s from the other world.”

“Uh-oh. Now I have competition from some lordling with an iron sword and a Renaissance Faire style outfit, right?”

“Hardly. Believe me, there’s a shortage of good men over there.”

Esteban leaned back, still rubbing his arm, and sighed languidly. “Then maybe you can tell me the story behind it. There has to be one. My *tía* once told me that every woman has a story about her favorite pieces of jewelry just like all men have stories about their scars.”

I considered for a moment. It wasn’t that I wanted to hold back anything from Esteban. But I’d just relived the memories around this locket last night, and they were pretty heavy things for a fun night out.

“This was given to me by a very brave woman before she died,” I said, carefully picking and choosing my words. “She was someone who turned out to be a friend. Not enough of a friend at the very end, I guess, but a friend in her own way.”

Esteban gave me a puzzled look. Before he could ask me anything further, an electronic jingle sounded in the confines of the car. He looked pained as he stuck a hand in his pocket.

“Dayna, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “But I better take that. That’s telling me it’s from Homicide.”

“Then you’d better take it,” I agreed. While he dug out his phone, I re-adjusted my top and tucked the locket back into place.

“That’s interesting,” he said, as he held up his screen. “It’s Vega’s extension. I’ll put it on speaker so you can listen in.”

Esteban thumbed the speaker button and then hit ‘Receive’. Of course, right at that second someone in the car next to us hit one of passion’s high notes. There was an awkward pause at the other end of the line, and Vega’s voice came out rather matter-of-factly.

“You know, if I’m interrupting something, I can call back later.”

“If that had involved me, do you think I’d have picked up in the first place?” Esteban growled back.

“Good point.”

“Well, you’ve got my attention. I’m on personal time now, so what is it?”

“Hold on. I need to put someone else on the line.” There was the sound of muffled talking, and then a new, male voice came through the speaker.

“Detective Esteban? Max Cohen here. Sorry to bother you on a Saturday night,” the older man said, and I could practically hear his ‘attaboy’ smirk through the receiver. “Vega’s the only one around who knew your number. She thinks you’ll be with Dayna, and I need to talk to her, pronto.”

Startled, I looked up at Esteban. He nodded, so I leaned over closer to the phone. “This is Dayna, Max. What’ve you got to tell me?”

Cohen let out a sigh. “It’s about your friend, Shelly Richardson.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

"I tried to get hold of you as soon as I had a lead on your friend," Detective Cohen said. His voice sounded tinny through the speaker on Esteban's phone. "Tried your work and home phone, but I couldn't reach you."

"That's my fault," I admitted. "I left it at home since I was going out for the evening."

"Anyway, I thought you should know. Your hunch about Shelly Richardson might be correct."

Hope flared in my chest like a beacon. I sat up, hands clenched. "What did you find?"

"We've got a possible sighting. An undercover officer working south of Figueroa talked with a tweaker down there. He said the guy was talking non-stop about a woman that matches Ms. Richardson's description to a tee."

A *tweaker* was LAPD lingo for a methamphetamine addict. Given how the drug could reliably produce obsessive-compulsive behavior, it was no wonder the guy was talking non-stop about what he saw. Esteban's brow furrowed, and he spoke before I could say anything else.

"This tweaker you're talking about," Esteban inquired, "Are we talking about a freakishly tall guy, shaggy hair, smells like a goat? Goes by the name of 'Jagger'?"

"Yeah, figured you might know who he is after what went down last night. That's the guy. Want me to send someone down, talk to him some more? Or hold off until you get one of your people down to handle it?"

Esteban cast a quick, guilty glance in my direction. "Neither. I'll drop Dayna off and go check this out myself. Shelly's a friend of mine too."

"Copy that," Cohen said, and hung up.

"If you think you're going to get me out of this car, you have something else coming," I said defiantly.

Esteban chuckled. “I know you better than that.”

He put the car into reverse and left our amorous neighbors to their business. Then he swung us out onto Mullholland and back down towards the expanse of lights below. I did my best to tamp down on this crazy rush of hope that made me want to shoulder Esteban out of the driver’s seat and then gun the motor far beyond the speed limit. But he knew where we were going, and he wasn’t about to arrive at our destination with a slew of traffic cops in tow.

We’d exchanged the Hollywood Freeway for the slightly faster moving southbound Harbor Freeway by the time I figured something out. That guilty glance Esteban had thrown my way had come right after Cohen had mentioned something that happened just twenty-four hours ago.

“Hey, I don’t mean to pry,” I said carefully, “But what ‘went down’ last night?”

Esteban smiled grimly as we passed one of the few clusters of Los Angeles’ skyscrapers. The lights cast a chalky pall against the cloud cover. “You remember that body we worked on last week? Mister ‘Stay out of the thirteen’?” I nodded, and he continued. “You were right about that underground rave club. Vega and I have been working ‘upstream’ from that case, trying to find out who’s supplying the drugs.”

“Something go sour last night?”

“You could say that. I got a lead from Jagger to talk with this *camello*, a mid-level dealer. The talk turned into some ‘aggressive negotiation’. I got tagged in the fight.”

“Your arm,” I realized. “Injured it ‘lifting’, you said?”

“Well, technically, I was ‘lifting’ two hundred pounds of drug dealer when I tossed him into the garbage dumpster. He objected to my doing this, so he nicked me with his knife. I went down to medical services after that, got stitched up, and that was that.”

My voice went up a notch. “So ‘nicked’ means ‘only needing stitches’? I swear, you and my griffin friend Grimshaw ought to hang out more often. You have the same philosophy when it comes to on-the-job injuries.”

“I didn’t want you to worry.” His jaw tightened, but he focused on the road ahead as he spoke more quietly. “I try not to worry about you, you know. I fail all the time.”

“You worry–”

“I’ve never even seen *half* the creatures that you’ve told me about in that world of yours. But I do know one thing: they’re dangerous. Much more dangerous than you let on. And you’ve been lucky. Your friends have been pulling your butt out of the fire a lot more than you think.”

I wanted to flare up at him, tell him that he didn’t know a damned thing. The only problem was, he was right. The opposition didn’t come in my weight class all that often. And those that did either had magic, claws, armor, or simply fought dirty.

We pulled off the freeway down a long boulevard and into a warren of side streets. The street signs, the ones that you could read through the graffiti, were a mixture of English, Spanish, and an Asian script I couldn’t identify.

Esteban pulled over to the curb, just down the street from where a club and several bars lit up the night sky with red neon. Techno music pounded out a skull-cracking beat. A couple women dressed in stilettos, short jackets, and fishnet hose hung out under one of the few working streetlamps. One strutted up to the car and leaned a hip against my door so that we could both get a good look down her generous V-neck.

“*Hola, guapo*,” she said to Esteban, in a voice made gravelly by cigarette tar and night air. “Nice car. You interested in a three-way-bang?”

“Take a good look at my face,” he said, in a chilly voice. “Then you tell me.”

The woman paled and took a step back, like she was going to bolt. “You don’t have anything on me, officer.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to bother you. I’ve got something special for Jagger.”

Her blood-red lips curled up in a sneer. “You got something for him? If you want me to talk to Jagger, then what do you got for me?”

“Christmas already came early for you. I’m not bringing you back for the boys in Vice. If I change my mind, you’ll have to explain it to your *chulo*. He’ll probably cut your smile a little wider for having to bail you out twice in as many days.”

The woman stalked away as quickly as she could in her wobbly high heels. She shot Esteban the finger, and then disappeared into the shadows. The other working girls followed suit. Alanzo let out a sigh.

“To protect and to serve,” he muttered, and then turned his attention back to me. “Jagger’s a strange guy. He doesn’t smell like a rose bush, but he’s not dangerous. He’s usually got his ear to the street, too.”

“Can you trust him?” I asked. “I mean, if he’s a meth addict?”

“Yeah. He’s not only into meth. He’s got a special addiction I help him with.”

Jagger came shambling out of the alleyway up ahead. He spotted Esteban’s Barracuda and made his way over. This guy looked as skinny as Herald – if someone had thrown the Lord Pursuivant onto the rack and given the wheel a few spins. He had a shaggy mane of nut-brown hair and the classic pockmarked complexion of a regular meth user.

He stood over by the driver’s door, somehow managing to slouch when standing straight, oblivious to the occasional car that whizzed on past. I thanked my lucky stars that he’d gone to Esteban’s side of the car. Even from where I sat, the scent of cat piss rolled off the man in a wave.

“Hey, ‘Lanzo,” he said, in a voice that squeaked like a rusty gate, “What’s my number one hombre up to?”

“Just thought you might be interested in a nip of something that came in today.” Esteban reached over to grab a paper bag on the floor behind my seat. He shook it, and I heard liquid sloshing. “That is, if you can help us out with something.”

The junkie’s eyes sparkled with life for the first time. “You got the stuff?”

“It’s fresh, my man. Right off the boat.”

Jagger spread his arms wide, which helped fan the stench some

more. “Lay it on me, then. If I know it, I’ll spill it.”

“I’m looking for someone.” Esteban paused and turned to me. “Dayna, do you have a picture I can show him?”

“Sure,” I said, and I dug in my purse. I came up with a wallet-sized picture of me and Shelly at last year’s office holiday party, and handed it over.

“Oh, her!” Jagger said, almost instantly. “She’s all right. I got some hash and beans from her, might’ve been the morning before last. Up at the soup kitchen. The one at the mission off Florence and the *barrio azul*.”

“Do you think she’s still there?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s for sure. She showed up there like, a week ago. Works every day, all day. Never goes home, seems like.”

“You’re my guy, amigo,” Esteban said, handing over the bag. Jagger beamed as he pulled out a slim plastic bottle filled with a snotlike yellow liquid. Before he turned to vanish back down the alleyway, I caught a glimpse of a red label reading *Banana Sun – Get Peeled*.

Esteban put the Barracuda into gear and accelerated away from the curb. Even though we still had the top down, he switched on the dashboard vents to whisk away the last of Jagger’s stink. I gave him a puzzled look.

“What the heck did you give him?” I asked.

Esteban shrugged. “Banana-flavored soft drink. I came across it when I visited with my sister-in-law’s family down in Costa Rica. Jagger used to be a beachcomber or something down there and got hooked on it. He thinks it prevents malaria.”

“How come I’ve never seen this stuff?”

“It keeps failing some federal test for being ‘fit for human consumption’. That, and a lot of people don’t like the flavor.”

I shuddered. “Did you try it?”

“Put it this way. You don’t develop a taste for the stuff. You develop an *immunity*.”

With that, Esteban turned us north onto Florence Avenue and gunned the motor.

Shelly, I thought, *I hope to God that you've stayed put. Then maybe I can get a decent night's sleep for a change.*

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

The ‘barrio azul’ literally means ‘blue neighborhood’. Or, to be frank, it meant ‘the blue ghetto’. It referred to the high poverty area towards the southern end of the L.A. Metro blue light rail line. I’d been down here all too often during my time working with the LAPD. Shootings and stabbings were common crimes in this area, either over drugs, contraband or a relationship that had turned a dark corner from control to abuse.

It sent a chill down my spine to think about it as we pulled up in front of one of the old Mission District storefronts. Back in the 1940’s, it was probably a charming neighborhood grocery store. Today, the front door and windows had been plastered over with squares of plywood or sheet metal. The sandy-colored stucco was coated in grime and an extra layer of illegible graffiti tags.

Esteban shut the car’s motor off. It was dead quiet in the lot outside the building. He checked his shoulder holster before we got out. I gave him a questioning look.

“I doubt we’ll run into trouble,” he admitted. “But you never know.”

“I’m glad one of us thought ahead,” I said encouragingly. The most lethal thing I had on me was a bottle of breath spray at the bottom of my purse. And I was leaving that under the passenger seat.

We walked around the side of the building, senses alert. Here, even the dim streetlights failed to illuminate much of anything. My eyes were already starting to play tricks on me, spotting movement in the shadows.

Esteban pushed open a badly dented chain-link gate with a silence banishing squeal. I gritted my teeth but followed him inside, expecting at any moment to be greeted by an irate night watchman or rabid guard dog. Mentally, I cursed myself for such cowardly thoughts and put them out of mind.

It turned out that we had very little to worry about. Without bothering to knock, Esteban pushed open the building’s badly peeling

service door. He snorted, and then waved me inside. The watchman, if you could call him that, was a portly gentleman who was slumped inside the doorway in an easy chair, snoring away.

I paid the sleeper no mind. The interior of the building was what grabbed my attention. Wooden folding tables and metal chairs had been lined up with parade-ground precision. On each table, dining spots had been precisely marked out with little folded paper napkins and a plastic trinity of fork, spoon, and knife.

And although the walls could have used a new coat of paint and the ceiling lights some extra bulbs, every scrubbable surface gleamed. While Esteban surveyed the room, I spotted the door marked *LA COCINA* and hurried over.

I almost slipped on the freshly mopped floor as I pushed through into the kitchen. I steadied myself against a nearby fridge, noting again that every nearby surface had been scoured to near-aseptic perfection. The one flaw in all the cleanliness was a stack of dirty dishes piled high in a sink full of soapy water.

My heart leapt into my throat as I spotted Shelly lying on the floor nearby. I called out for Esteban as I knelt by her side. Shelly lay on her back, dressed in a pair of women's work pants, a tattered sweatshirt, and an apron with so many stains that it could have doubled as a Rorschach inkblot test.

Shelly's clothes hung loose on her frame, as if she'd lost fifteen pounds on some hellish crash diet. Her complexion had gone waxy and ashen, which made the deep black circles under her eyes look like generous smears of greasepaint makeup. I immediately touched her wrist, seeking a pulse and fearing the worst. She let out a garbled, unintelligible mumble.

Esteban came pounding through the door and promptly slid on the slick floor. He flailed his arms and grabbed the refrigerator to keep from taking a tumble. As he steadied himself, I checked Shelly's other vitals. Her skin felt cool, almost clammy. Pulse was slow and steady. Her knuckles, elbows, and the pads of her fingers had been rubbed or scraped raw.

Not knowing what else I could do, I gently shook her shoulder.

She woke immediately, with an explosive exhalation, as if coming up from a deep-water dive. Her eyes focused on me blearily through her smudged pince-nez glasses.

"Dayna? Are you real?" she asked, in a whispery voice that sounded as raw as her poor hands. "I can't rightly tell if anyone is no more."

"I'm real," I assured her. "I'm getting you out of here."

"Can't leave," she said, and a look of fear came into her eyes. "I got dishes to do. Lots of dishes, and people need me–"

"We need you too," I said. "If it makes you feel any better, I've got lots of dishes that need washing at my place as well."

"That'll do fine," she murmured. Her eyes closed, and she sagged in my arms.

Esteban's eyes went wide. "Is she…"

"No, her pulse is steady," I said. "She's suffering from clinical exhaustion. We need to get her out of here."

Esteban bent down and slipped one arm under Shelley's back, the other under her knees. Then he grunted, lifted with his legs, and stood back up. He blinked, surprised.

"She's a lot lighter than I thought she'd be. I'm not sure that's a good sign."

"Come on," I said, as I held the kitchen door open for him.

I alternated between supporting Shelly's head and opening doors until Esteban deposited her gently in the car. The back seat of a Barracuda wasn't exactly roomy, but the snug fit would prevent her from rolling around too much. Esteban got the engine started and back onto the closest freeway.

"You think she's on any drugs, legal or otherwise?" Esteban said, over the rush of wind.

I considered. "I'm pretty sure she's not."

"Good. That would look bad on her work record." While he kept one hand on the wheel, Esteban pulled out his phone and started dialing. "First Samaritan is the closest place with an all-hours emergency room, I'll let them know we're on the way."

"No, don't do that!" I said, and I put my hand over his. "We need

to bring her back to my place."

Puzzled, he set the phone down. Esteban navigated the light wee-hours traffic and finally pulled into my driveway half an hour later. Again, I held doors open as he carried Shelly inside and placed her in my guest bedroom. I couldn't help but think of how I'd tucked Liam into the very same bed a few months ago, while doing my best to care for him when he was completely exhausted.

Shelly opened her eyes a creak. "Dayna, where are we? I'm so sorry I can't help anymore…"

I sat next to her and rested my hand on her forehead. "You're safe, you're going to be staying at my place for a while. I need you to get some rest before you tackle my kitchen, okay?"

"That'd be nice…if I could somehow get to sleep."

"Wait just a moment," I said, and I went to dig in my medicine cabinet.

Luckily, I was able to find the leftover pills of zolpidem from when I'd dealt with a bout of insomnia four or five years ago. Then I got a cup of cool water and brought everything back to my friend. Shelly protested weakly, but I managed to get the pills and most of the water into her. I sat by her side for another few minutes, only getting up when I heard the first of many deep snores.

Esteban got up from the easy chair in my living room as soon as I closed the door to the guest room behind me. He looked worried, but I moved to quickly reassure him.

"She's okay," I said. "I got some water and sleeping pills in her, that should go some of the way to making things right."

"That's fine for the moment," he said. "I'm no doctor, but we need to take her to the hospital, for observation if nothing else."

"They can't help her, believe me."

"Then we need to let her family know."

"No! Esteban, you need to trust me on this one, the only chance she has is for me to work with her."

He crossed his arms. "Then you need to fill me in on what exactly is going on here. Because it looks to me like you're putting her life and *both* of our jobs on the line if anything happens to her."

I took a breath and ran my fingers through my hair. “You’re right. You need to know.”

I gave Esteban a quick run-down on who Destry was, and the results of the confrontation between him, me, and Robert McClatchy. He looked stunned as I detailed my suspicions about what had happened to Shelly that same day.

“Destry’s power as a pooka, as a dream-horse, is immense,” I explained. “Probably even more so, given the reason he was born – to enter into mind combat with the so-called ‘Creatures of the Dark’. You know how bad McClatchy has been out to get me, right? It took a lot of mind alteration to get him to back off. And I think that, in redirecting Bob, it’s made him more obsessed. More driven.”

“And in Shelly’s case, she was driven…to help?”

“I think it set up some kind of mental feedback loop that she couldn’t break out of. The only way she could cope was to go out and help people, but the compulsion became so strong that it wouldn’t let her rest. The point is, this is a magically created illness. I need to find a magical way to counter her obsession. Our medicine can’t do any more than treat the symptoms.”

Esteban digested that for a moment. He looked at me, astonished. “This ‘Destry’ did all that damage, and he’s one of your friends. But you’re worried about *me* when I go out on the job?”

I sighed. “You are ridiculously good at making me realize things.”

“It’s a burden,” he admitted, putting his hands about my waist. “This was one heck of a date night, but I have to admit, I thought what happened was good.”

We shared a quiet laugh. I drew myself in against his warm body and kissed him, hard.

“Actually, what happened was a *lot* better than good.”

We walked back outside, where the moon was now shining full and bright above the ragged cloud cover. He pulled my purse out from where I’d hidden it, returned it to me with one more kiss, and then started up the ‘Cuda with a roar.

I gave him a wave as he turned back out onto the street. I still felt the warmth of his lips on mine. Felt his male hardness against my

body, pressing up against where I wanted it.

But I had to put that thought, those delicious feelings, all aside. Now that I'd found Shelly, a whole new set of problems emerged. I knew that I couldn't keep her out of sight forever. I needed to get her help.

And I didn't have the slightest idea what to do next.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

My hand barely fit around the coiled-lizard shape of the iron door handle that led to my tower room. I'd never really noticed how huge the entrance to my tower demesne was. Now I wondered if there was something faintly ironic about it.

The door opened with its usual meaty-sounding *clunk* of iron and wood on stone as I stepped inside. Only this time, it startled Fitzwilliam's Court Wizard awake from where he'd been kneeling next to the table. Galen's human torso had been sprawled out on the tabletop, head cradled in one hand, an empty tankard of ale in the other.

"It's not ready, it's not ready!" he insisted, as his senses snapped into focus.

"Whoa, there," I said, closing the door more quietly behind me. "Sorry to wake you like that. I didn't expect to find you here."

"Nor I you," the Wizard admitted, and he got to all four feet and stretched his arms. He let out a centaur-sized yawn, and added, "I was up all night working on the King's project. It is turning out to be considerably trickier than I had foreseen. I earnestly hope that you are encountering better luck."

"Well, that depends how you interpret three different things."

I opened one of the room's shutters a crack and peered out. Chill air spilled in, along with a sparkle of snowflakes. The season's first snow had arrived a full month ahead of schedule, and the palace grounds were now frosted with a thin rime of white.

"What, perchance, might these three items be?"

"Well, first off, I got a 'snow day' from the King's court today."

Galen gave me a puzzled look. "You have explained to me about this 'snow day' before. Yet I do not believe the snow has yet crested a human's toes in depth, nor shall it. I remain skeptical how this meager amount could have affected–"

"I was speaking figuratively," I closed the shutter and stood by the hearth, where several large embers continued to glow, casting off a

drowsy heat. “It’s kind of a human in-joke. On my world, I mean. Getting a ‘snow day’ means that you got an unexpected break in your schedule.”

“I comprehend. My thanks for supplying clarity.”

“No problem. I just wish I could feel better about getting this day off.” I started to pace the room as I talked. It was a nervous tic of mine, sure, but I needed release of some sort. “Lord Behnaz and Ivor got into a shouting match over who should get the remaining money to pay their people if the Noctua don’t act on Fitzwilliam’s budget.”

“That sounds depressingly familiar.”

“You’d think. Only this time it got to the point where all the knights at both tables were ready to draw swords. Fitzwilliam finally got sick of it, so he dissolved the meeting until ‘everyone decides to start acting like adults’.”

Galen snorted. “In that case, we may have seen the last royal court for the better part of a millennium.”

“Would I be so lucky. Anyway, the second thing is that I got the lab test results back on this horn feather, the one that’s supposed to be from the Albess.” I reached into one of the pockets that had been cunningly hidden inside my custom-made cloak, pulled out said feather, and handed it to my centaur friend. “It’s from an older female owl, but there’s no telling if it’s from Thea. But give it a sniff, what do you smell on that feather?”

Galen’s reaction was instantaneous. “No doubt. That is definitely sulfur.”

“Yes. Based on the scent and some burn marks that someone tried to hide, I’m thinking that it was a dragon that attacked Thea, not a wyvern.”

“But for pity’s sake, why? Why would it matter to a murderer to make such a fine distinction between one type of reptile and another?”

“That’s the question of the day,” I said, resignedly. “I’ve been trying to puzzle that beauty out since last night. Not that I got a lot of sleep, for that matter.”

“Indeed. I suspect that the third item in your inventory plays into

your lack of slumber."

"I found my friend, Shelly. With Esteban's help, she's sleeping at my place."

Galen's face brightened. "Why, that is most excellent news!"

"It's good news," I admitted grudgingly. "But I'm not sure I can help her. She was still out of it this morning. I almost stayed behind to watch over her. Half of me figures I should've stayed, instead of playacting 'Dame' for Fitzwilliam's court."

"I must object strongly to that sentiment," Galen chided me. "Self-pity does not become a Dame. And perhaps your title is nothing more than a plaything to you. But to us here, in the world that Grimshaw, Liam, and I call our home, it matters a great deal."

I grimaced. "Damn. That did come out pretty bad, didn't it?"

"Undeniably awful. Be comforted that we are alone for the moment."

"Believe me, I am." I looked up at my friend. "Forgive me, Galen. I was a little out of line there."

"Your apology is heartily accepted. Continue with your story."

"I got Shelley to eat some chicken broth and a piece of buttered toast. Then she begged me for another sleeping pill to put her back under. I gave her a double dose, that's enough to knock out a bear. She'll be asleep until this evening, I think."

"Should she wake up prior to your return, will she be safe? From herself, or others?"

I chewed my lip in thought. "No one's out to harm her, so far as I know. As for keeping her from self-harm, I hid the rest of the sleeping pills away, and my car keys. But I can't exactly lock Shelly in my house. She might decide to leave if she wakes up. I hope she doesn't."

"And the LAPD? Has Esteban notified them?"

"I convinced him not to. Her illness is one that only magic can cure." I appealed to my Wizard friend. "Galen, I'm really grasping at straws here. Is there anything you can do to help her?"

Galen set his jaw. "Not unless we have exhausted all other options. I would be just as likely to wipe all her memories as fix her compulsions. My magic relies a great deal on what one might call

‘brute force’. It lacks the finesse needed to pry into the mind. Perhaps Destry has that talent, but it could only be honed with months or years of practice.”

“And even if he did have that practice,” I groaned, “I don’t have any way to contact him to ask for help.”

“Perhaps this view is unnecessarily bleak. Surely there will be a way forward for your friend, as there has always been for all of us. Perhaps–”

Galen’s encouragement was cut off in midsentence by a knock at the door. He gave me a questioning look. I shrugged and nodded towards the entry.

“You may enter!” Galen boomed out in his deep voice.

Looking every inch like an exotically colored stork, the Lord of the Pursuivant pushed his way inside. He looked happy as he spotted me and gave me another head-to-toe examination. From what I could tell, I passed the test.

“Marvelous, just marvelous,” Herald twittered. “I knew that I’d picked the right colors and sizes for you. But I am being rude, am I not? How do you like your new clothes? They make you quite the Dame at court, I’m sure!”

“I love the new look,” I said honestly. “And I’m getting less than half as many strange looks when I show up now, so I think I’ll also count that as a gain.”

“Then I hope it is enough to offset the bad news I must convey. Oh me, oh my, things are in such disarray. I’m sorry to tell you that the King told me himself that he wishes to delay the festival that was planned in your honor. He’s worried about the royal treasury, or at least that’s the reason he gave me. This is just so…uncivilized!”

I traded a look with Galen. Herald seemed disconcerted when he saw that the Wizard and I were grinning.

“You’d be surprised how welcome that ‘bad’ news is,” I said, grinning even more broadly as Herald looked on incredulously.

“Yes, apparently it is,” he demurred. “In any case, I have another duty that I must fulfil: I must have your decision on your knightly sigil.”

My grin vanished like a sun gone behind a cloud. With all that had happened, between trying to find out what had happened to Thea, my date with Esteban, and bringing Shelly back from the *barrio azul*, I hadn't given it a single iota of thought!

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Chapter Thirty

"Um," I declared eloquently, "I'm going to need more time to think it over."

"What? Oh, that can't be, that can't be! There are royal artisans all over the castle who will be dishonored if they do not show the King their new designs before the day is out. They have been paid to remain on site here at the palace the last two days, and if funds are indeed tight, that is money that cannot be paid back!"

"All right, fine, let's figure out something now," I said, nettled.

I wasn't in any mood for this right now, but Herald was really getting bent out of shape. For all I knew, maybe there were artisans on the royal payroll who'd end up with a black mark on their records, and in Andeluvia a black mark could easily mean anything from not getting hired again, to being flogged in public.

"Allow me to assist," Herald said smoothly, comfortably back in his element. We sat down in a pair of chairs at the table as he pulled over the huge leather-bound book he'd left with me last time. He opened it and began thumbing through pages, all while Galen looked over our shoulders with scarcely concealed amusement. "Everything has meaning, even the tincture of and division of your sigil's field."

"Tincture meaning 'color', right?"

"Shade of color, Dayna," he corrected me, as he flipped to a page with about thirty different swatches of green. A combination of numbers had been written in below each swatch. "What do you see here?"

In truth, it looked rather like a brochure for day-gloss paints at the local home improvement store. But rather than compound my rudeness from earlier, I simply said, "Multiple shades of green. I don't see how that's relevant."

"The shade itself connotes different things." He pointed to one swatch that was a light, seafoam green, and then one that was a darker, pool-table green. "This first shade adorns the shield of a knightly family that lives close to the Weatherglass Sea, so the green is

reminiscent of seawater. The second is the darker green of pine trees, so it is claimed by one of the lords whose demesnes constitute woodland."

"Okay, I get it. What about the 'division' of the field?"

"Many knights and lords prefer a single color, symbolizing purity. Others will split or quarter their shields with different colors in order to broadcast an express alliance, marriage, or even a coalition." As he spoke, he flipped through a series of pages showing examples of sigils divided into two, three, four, and even one that had seven divisions carved into a shield emblem like slices of Technicolor pie. "After all, our own kingdom's colors are crimson and coal. This symbolized the joining of two families to create our first royal line."

"I'm still following." In spite of myself, I was finding this interesting. "What else do I need to select?"

Herald turned the pages at a faster pace now. "You can select multiple emblems, symbols, or letters to place atop your sigil's field or fields. The custom is to select one central symbol, with no more than one supporting image per division. Otherwise, the design might look too cluttered, and who likes an overly cluttered picture?"

At least the images recorded in the books helped spur ideas on. Many had animal figures as the central symbol. I saw great golden eagles with spread wings, roaring bears, sinuous snakes, or proud griffins. Some used objects like crossed swords, silver goblets, or even a bejeweled crown. Still others went for more abstract patterns, mostly put in as the 'secondary' symbols: a checkered grid, a spiral, even an upside-down 'V' that I think was meant to be a mountain.

I thought back on my time in Andeluvia. I didn't have any power-marriages to speak of, but I did have friends that I counted on like family. And from what I'd seen in my travels and my investiture, the award of my demesne…

My mind did one of it peculiar *clicks*, and I knew what I wanted.

Galen had left several blank sheets of parchment on the table from his work of last night. I found one that hadn't been spattered with ale and then pulled a ballpoint pen from my cloak. I quickly sketched out my idea for a central symbol atop a quartered field. Then I flipped

through the book, selecting the colors and adding in their numbers into each quarter-chunk.

"Here," I said, pushing the finished result into Herald's hands. "Tell me if that runs afoul of any of your office's conventions."

The Lord of the Pursuivant checked my selections against the paint-swatch pages and then the quartered shields. His face beamed as he looked up at me, and I knew the answer.

"It does not," he pronounced. "I think it is a rather impressive design, actually."

And with that, he closed his book, tucked it under his arm, and left at a near run to deliver my sketch to the royal artisans.

I leaned back in my chair, tucked my pen away, and let out a sigh.

"That's done, at least," I declared to Galen. "For a tower room, it seems that I don't get a lot of privacy here."

That was the cue for *another* damned knock.

"Galen," I said, as I put my head in my hands, "Please, just bar the door or something."

"I would certainly comply with your wishes," Galen said, with a wry tone. "Except for the fact that the knocking is coming from one of the windows."

"What the–" I began to say, before Galen threw open the shutters nearest to him.

Xandra fluttered into the room, knocking a dusting of snow from the window ledge as she did so. She dropped a little cloth package on the table in front of me before settling on the back of the chair Herald had vacated. She shook off yet more flakes that clung to her head.

"As much apology as this one can muster," Xandra said, sounding even more out of breath than when she'd begged me to meet her in the Grove of the Willows. "This one's youngest offspring of her clutch asked us to bring this to you."

I halfway knew what I would find as I unwrapped the cloth, but it hurt to see it all the same. Tucked lovingly into the folds was an achingly small bundle of downy wing feathers. Each tiny feather was the color of orange sherbet.

I closed my eyes and willed myself not to cry again.

“Was it…how did he…” I struggled to ask.

“One’s beloved son passed away as last night’s full moon crested the heavens. This one flew under bough of tree, scud of cloud, and through dark tunnels to bring the package. It was not done with intentions as casual as a flight of pass-by friends.”

“You had to sneak it out of the Roost,” I realized. “Why?”

“One fears the healers of the Noctua. They used chant and herb and unguent to help this one’s offspring. But through all their skill, the one in ill health only sank deeper into the mire. The Noctua are not ones who fail lightly. Embarrassment must have claimed their pride, for they took the deceased’s body as swiftly as a taloned foot grabs a mouse.”

I felt an all too familiar ugly chill deep inside. *Had the Noctua been embarrassed? Or had they taken Perrin’s little body as quickly as possible for some other reason?*

Yes, that was the forensic examiner voice speaking again. Seeing murder in every overturned stone, every red-tinged knife, at the bottom of every drained drinking glass. Which should have bothered me.

Except that voice had been *right* a hell of lot more than it had been wrong.

“We shall all weep for the little one, when we are able,” Xandra continued, sounding ever more serious, even in her whispery nun’s voice. “Hours do not exist for more important deeds and thoughts for now.”

Galen threw me a glance that was equal parts alarmed and confused. Even I was still trying to figure out Xandra’s ultimate meaning. But for her to push aside her grief over her son, something big was definitely in the air.

“We of the Hoohan have bided our time, moving in the darkness, waiting to strike. And now the stars are aligned, for today is the right time.”

“What do you mean, Xandra?” I asked. “Please, take your time and explain. We need to make sure there’s no misunderstanding between us on this.”

“So this one shall. The visit of the one who rides a griffin as a friend was noted and bruited about widely among those of the Roost. All who spoke of it concluded the same: She-from-another-world did the impossible.”

“The impossible? What did I do?”

The female owl fixed me with a grateful look. “She-from-another-world reached out to one like Perrin, like the Albess. Reached right into the realm of madness and changed the little one so that he died happy and comforted, enveloped in our wings.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. My eyes began to brim up again. Without a word, Galen handed me a clean cloth to dry my eyes before they spilled over.

“This one’s people agreed on one thing: that if she-from-another world can accomplish the impossible, that maybe the Hoohan can *also* do an impossible thing!”

“What would that be?”

“Why, one speaks of bringing back the sacred heart of the Hoohan!” Xandra said, with an air of defiance. “One speaks of rescuing the Albess from where the Noctua still imprison her!”

The world spun crazily under my feet for a second. My ears weren’t deceiving me, I was sure of it. Yet there was no way that I couldn’t ask the obvious question.

“You mean…Thea is still alive?” I asked desperately.

“Only for the moment,” Xandra cautioned. “But such time is like the final grains sifting through the neck of the hourglass. One is sure that the Albess shall be no more very soon, as surely as this one’s son perished at the Noctua’s tender mercies.”

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Chapter Thirty-One

In all the fantasy literature I'd read, wizards were the kind of people who wielded devastating magic but were weak as newborn kittens when it came to raw strength. For all I knew, Galen was on the lightweight end of the scale for centaurs as well. But compared to a human, centaurs easily fit into my personal category of 'damn strong'.

With a flex of his muscles, Galen easily hefted the giant slate board from its wheeled frame and laid it flat on my table. Then he handed Xandra a piece of chalk. Easily balancing on one foot, the Parlimentarian began sketching out maps and diagrams.

"One knows that the Albess has been laid to unhappy rest in the stony deeps of the Holy Order's Sepulcher of the Eight Talons," she said, between scribbles. "It lies close to the Roost of the Star Child, between the winds of ice and the setting sun."

"Wait, what the heck does that mean?" I asked, frustrated.

I had to force myself to remain calm. The uniquely owlish way of speech could get extremely trying. I normally didn't mind it too much, but I felt every tick of the clock and it was getting hard to figure out what Xandra was saying.

"I believe that I may have an inkling," Galen stated, in his best professorial manner. "Xandra, the 'Winds of Ice' are the chill ones that come from the north, correct?"

"One cannot but say yes."

"And the sun sets in the west, does it not?"

"Even a newly hatched chick knows that it does."

The Wizard turned back to me. "So, I'd say that this Sepulcher of the Eight Talons is to the north and west of the Roost."

That got a rueful chuckle out of me. "Maybe I should let someone else try to solve all the mysteries around here."

"Banish the very thought!" Galen said, aghast.

Xandra finished off the rest of her map showing the Sepulcher at the base of a series of cliffs looking as if they'd been shaved perfectly flat by a straightedge razor. She looked up at me, owl eyes blinking.

“One wishes to know if the map is as clear as rain water,” she intoned.

“Yes, it’s clear,” I said. “But I also want to know about these ‘stony deeps’ you mentioned. In my world, a ‘sepulcher’ is a tomb, or a burial vault. Is this place underground? And is it big enough to get lost in?”

“Most assuredly, the sepulcher is beneath the ground, for it is where holy relics are kept. Also, one feels that it is difficult for one to lose one’s sense of place within.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“However, for those who lack wings or cannot see in light dim enough to be mistaken for night, it is *very* possible to lose all sense of one’s place within.”

“Why am I not the least surprised by that?” I groused. “You better draw me a map of the inside, then.”

Galen rubbed his chin in thought. “I wonder. Why would the Noctua choose to build in such a deep and shadowy place?”

Xandra looked up from where she’d already begun her next sketch. “The Noctua sense that the time of the Past War is drawing near. One heard of rumors all through the Roost. Of talks in the shadows with the ones who are now arisen from the dark.”

The Wizard looked grim at that. “That is troubling, to say the least. For now, as I have heard Dayna say, let us ‘put a pin’ in it.”

“Only when we get the Albess back do I want to find out more about that,” I agreed. “Xandra, are your fellow owls ready to move?”

“Those of the Roost are but waiting for this one’s word,” she replied. “However, one cannot expect help from more than this one dwelling.”

“What? Why not?”

The Parlimentarian fluffed her feathers out, looking indignant and ashamed at the same time. “One’s people do not willingly attack the Noctua! It is forbidden to raise a talon to the members of that holy order!”

“Not even to save the Albess?”

“One’s people are not aware of the black night of the Noctua’s treachery, save those who believe in what this one has witnessed. And

even then, it was only the example set by she-from-another-world who enkindled their spirit to stand like stone against the tide."

I nodded wearily. "I understand. Your Roost is taking a very dangerous action by doing this."

"The ones who dwell in the lair of the Star Child are not warriors of the Noctua's caliber, but we shall do what we can, by the strength of our wings and the bite of our talons."

"Whatever help you can give, I'll take it." I stood back from the board and took a breath. "And while I gather what I need, please finish the diagram of the Sepulcher. It may be the critical piece we need."

"One shall do so with alacrity."

I touched the medallion that hung at my neck as I turned to speak to Galen. "Luckily, I have several charges left on this. That should be just enough to handle what I need to do."

"And that might be?" he asked.

"I need to blip back to Los Angeles and pick up some supplies. That's going to take time, and we need to make our move before night falls. None of us save for Xandra and her friends see well in the dark, while all the Noctua do just fine. That'll give them an advantage we can't afford."

"Agreed."

"Once I get what I need, I'll spell myself directly back here. Can you contact Liam at the Grove of the Willows?"

"Assuredly. I can also bring him here."

"Even better. What about Shaw? Not only will we need our griffin friend, he'll complain about missing all the opportunities for a glorious death if we don't bring him."

"Most assuredly he would," Galen snorted. "Luckily, obtaining Grimshaw's participation will be easy. He returned last evening to the palace and is even now busy depleting one of the royal kitchens of all its fresh meat. I shall bring him here to wait for you."

"Good. Give me..." I did some calculations in my head and said, "Let's say about four hours to meet you back here."

"That already puts you into the middle of the afternoon," Galen

cautioned. “It is possible that you may be cutting it close to the edge of darkness.”

“Maybe, but I’d rather be a little late and ready, rather than early and unprepared.”

“And if, perchance, I should need to see King Fitzwilliam, shall I tell him of our plan?”

I thought on that for a moment. I shook my head resignedly.

“No. If you tell him, he’ll want to mount an expedition, maybe send some knights with us. With all the eyes and ears Raisah has around the castle, it’ll be sure to give us away. Better to wait until the following day, and then ask for him to send his knights out against the Noctua, fully prepared to engage an enemy that has declared war on Andeluvia.”

Galen looked aghast at my words. “What are you saying?”

“Neither Shaw, Liam or I have any value to the Noctua as prisoners,” I said bluntly. “If we don’t come back from this attempt, then we’re as good as dead.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two

I arrived with a flash and a lurch of my stomach as I stumbled across my living room rug. Once I steadied myself, I peeked in the door of the guest bedroom. Shelly had rolled over onto her side, but she still let out snores that would have done credit to a ripsaw.

Next, I went into my own room and swapped out my Andeluvian clothes for my mundane twenty-first century clothing. Aside from looking less like a refugee from *Ye Olde Medieval Times* dinner theatre, it was also thirty degrees warmer here in Southern California. I lovingly set Xandra's specially delivered bundle atop my dresser as I pulled on a short-sleeved top.

Since I hadn't even had the luxury of Fitzwilliam's bread, butter, and salt, I went to the kitchen to quickly put together a quick brunch. I had a feeling that I wouldn't find any time to eat for the rest of the day. I pillaged the embarrassingly high stack of leftover takeout boxes in the fridge. A few minutes of scraping things onto plates and nuking them in the microwave followed.

At least I wasn't kidding when I said that Shelly would have a stack of things to wash when she woke up, I thought. Then I filled up on hungover Thai drunken noodles, a quarter cup of creamed lentils, and a brick-hard vegetarian samosa the size of my fist. I grabbed a watery two-day old container of iced tea to wash it all down and then dug out my car keys from where I'd hidden them under the napkin holder.

I had to hold my breath as I squeezed around the interior of my garage to get to my car. For now, my barely-two-car garage was jammed tight between my chest freezer, my commute car, and the OME van. I'd have custody of the van and all the forensics equipment inside for at least another week or two.

That stopped me dead in my tracks.

I had custody of all the forensics equipment inside…

Time was of the essence, but I could spare a little more for poor Perrin.

I continued my side-shuffle gait until I got around the rear of the

van. Since my garage was longer than it was wide, I had room to halfway open the back doors. I pulled out a couple things I needed, closed the van back up, and then inhaled to work my way back into the house.

One quick stop to retrieve the bundle of feathers from my dresser, and I spread out everything across the desk in my study. I reached into the OME bag and first set up one of the portable field microscopes. Then I pulled on a set of clean latex gloves and used a pair of fine forceps to move all but one of Perrin's feathers into a sterile plastic bag.

The single feather I kept to place on the microscope plate was small, but it was definitely of the type that I wanted to look at. I was no bird veterinarian, but I'd helped my mom and sister raise and care for a pair of cockatiels, so I knew the basics. Young birds had an abundance of 'pin' feathers on their bodies, although I knew them as 'blood' feathers.

Blood feathers were distinguished from fully developed ones in that they still had an active blood supply flowing to the base of the shaft. This supplied the feather with nutrients and encouraged growth. It also meant that when this kind of feather was pulled from a bird's wing or body, bleeding could result.

I zeroed in on the base of the feather shaft with the microscope's lens, looking for that bleeding. I shifted the plate around until I found a couple of good views. What I found both puzzled me and raised the hackles on my darkest suspicions.

For starters, the little flecks of blood stuck to the shaft had a curiously washed-out look. Dried blood was supposed to look like a dark cake of protein strings caused by the clotting factors. Here, everything was a still tacky-looking light pink.

Then I looked at the cellular structure of the underlying quill base. It should have been a healthy latticework of tissues set out in layers like shingles on a shake roof. Instead, the 'shingles' were pockmarked with tiny lesions, dark pits against a waxy yellow-orange background.

Everything I saw pointed to the abnormal breakdown of red blood cells in the owlet's body. It looked just like the mark of one specific

condition: *hemolytic anemia*. And progressive anemia could lead to shortness of breath, chronic fatigue, and even death. The horrible thing was, this kind of disease could be inherited genetically, like with the sickle-cell variety.

But it could also be induced slowly, by poison.

I knew, all the way from when I was ten and studying what cockatiels ate, that certain compounds called *thisulfinates* could kill them quite easily. These compounds systematically tore apart the birds' red blood cells. It was one reason why we kept the birds away from kids who wanted to feel them chocolate.

Andeluvia, so far as I knew, didn't have chocolate. But I'd tasted onions, garlic, leeks, and chives in the food there, and those were all rich sources of thisulfinates. A little certainly wouldn't kill a large, healthy owl. In fact, even a large dose probably wouldn't do more than make them feel more than under the weather for a day or two.

But what about a young, sickly owlet? What would a steady diet of these sulfinate compounds do to him? And what if the diet had been administered over the course of a year? Which, I realized, was roughly how long the Noctua physicians had been 'caring' for Xandra's son.

There was a lot of 'what-ifs' in that string of logic. Too much to stand up to in court. But it put a renewed chill in my gut as I packaged everything back up and hurried back to my car.

A quick turn of the key and a jab to the garage door button, as I was on my way. I turned up Los Feliz boulevard and headed east, away from downtown. At this time of day, I'd be fighting lunch-crowd traffic. I was on a tight schedule, so I'd have to take the chance that Glendale, the next town over, would have what I wanted.

I managed to skid into a parking spot in front of the same sporting goods store that I'd purchased from before I'd visited the Reykajar aerie. In fact, I got the same clerk. His eyes showed recognition and puzzlement as I asked to buy yet another backpack.

Only this time, I was willing to pony up for something better than the floor model. It wasn't just the extra carrying space I wanted. I also wanted something that was less visible from the air. My original pack

was Day-Glo orange, which was so easy to spot that I might as well have sent up a signal flare.

That got me thinking. I dug out my credit card and made an extra purchase.

Once I'd stored my new goods in the trunk, I put a call in to an electronics store I'd stopped in once to buy new cables for my computer. They'd impressed me by not laughing when I ceded defeat in 'wirelessly' hooking up my computer, printer, and television. And as it happened, they had exactly what I was looking for. One larger-than-I'd-wanted charge later, and it was ready for pickup.

Andeluvia may be a magical place, but Los Angeles definitely has its benefits, I admitted to myself. *At least, if you have a car and a credit line.*

* * *

That good feeling persisted, even with the stomach-lurching trip back to Andeluvia. This time, Liam braced me on one side while Shaw steadied me on the other with an outstretched wing. I reached out myself and gave each of them a one-handed hug; there were times I quite literally needed their support, and they were always right there.

"We've been studying Xandra's maps while waiting for you," Liam said, nodding towards the board. "Galen's going to put an extra charge your medallion, so that you can transport Shaw, Xandra, and me along with you."

"That sounds great," I allowed, as I slipped the medallion's chain over my head and handed it to the Wizard. "But I've never been to the Noctua's hideout. I can't visualize it in my head to transport us there. And none of you are tuned in to the medallion."

Galen pressed the makeshift silver amulet between his palms and then turned away from us. He began concentrating, chanting under his breath as wisps of white energy began to seep from the cracks between his hands. I found it hard to tear my attention away as Liam went on.

"After looking over Xandra's map I realized that this Eight-Taloned Sepulcher is only two, maybe three leagues northwest of where Ardan and I met you on Sir Talish's lands."

"Some of your fayleene luck might be finally rubbing off on me," I

agreed. “I can definitely get us that far. Then we’ll have a few hours of hiking ahead of us.”

Shaw let out a sniff. “Perhaps thou dost wish to arrive in a more regal manner: riding a griffin, not crawling upon the earth.”

I gently scratched Grimshaw on the top of his head, the way he liked it. “That would be noble indeed,” I said, while Liam rolled his eyes. “But hardly stealthy. I have some different ideas there, but I’m just glad that you could make it.”

“Nay, ‘tis I who is glad,” Shaw said, between purrs. “And move we must. Whilst I was eating outside the royal kitchens a duel broke out between two knights-errant as to who might be paid their due on the morrow. I only stopped the two miscreants by threatening to consume the loser.”

“Damn it, things are going to start coming apart even faster. By the next morning the King’s treasury should be running seriously low and then people are really going to be feeling the pinch placed upon them by the owls.”

“Surely, thy monarch shall stand firm.”

“I hope so. But I honestly don’t know how long Fitzwilliam can support my cause. Not when all of his lords and knights are arrayed against me.”

“And if we are not present with you at all times,” Galen cautioned, as he finished his incantation, “I would be most concerned for what that mob of rabble might do to you, should they perceive you as the nexus of their financial problems.”

“Now there is a pretty good rationale for leaving the palace for an extended vacation,” Liam said. “Since the aerie isn’t an option, why not move to the Grove of the Willows with my people?” He glanced at my new pack as I slipped it off my back. “It looks like you’re prepared to stay a while in the woods, in any case.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I brought some more gear for us. Hopefully, stuff that will help us avoid confronting the Noctua at all.”

“I have something that might help, should the worst come to pass,” Galen said, and he handed me a foot-long, blunt-tipped wooden

stick. “This is a wand I’ve enchanted with three charges of stun-magic, similar to Soothsayer Zeno’s staff. Merely hold it firmly, point it at your target, and blink three times in quick succession to unleash a charge.”

I hefted the wand. It felt reassuringly solid. “I like it.”

“It is my hope that this item will prevent you from killing any of the Noctua. In my learned opinion, every death of an owl will make it more difficult to reconcile the rest of the Parliamentarians to our cause.”

“One must be sure to use one’s magic only as a last resort,” Xandra piped up. “The Noctua have placed wards around the mouth of the sepulcher both to warn them of any kind of magic, as well as to block such spellcraft.”

I considered. “What range are we talking about?”

“One does not know,” she said sadly. “One was not privy to such secrets.”

“Detection wards are relative simple to craft,” Galen informed me. “Most can detect any kind of spell, whether previously invoked or not, for at least two hundred yards. Anti-magic wards have a much more limited range, usually ten or fifteen yards.”

“That’s going to make it difficult to sneak up close,” I said grimly. “I was hoping to rely on your magic or Liam’s to conceal us as we drew near. We might have an entire army of owl warriors ready to swoop down on us before we get within a furlong on the place.”

“One knows that the Sepulcher of the Eight Talons is a place of worship and healing,” Xandra said, in her sweet nun’s voice. “It is a sacred space, not an armed camp. No more than a dozen Noctua remain there, and none carry the key and sigil of a jailer. The Albess must simply be too weak to move on her own, for they would not dare forcibly imprison the holiest of the holy.”

I had my doubts about that, but the news of fewer owls to deal with cheered me up. I zipped open my pack and started laying out the materials I’d picked up at the electronics store. All four of the magical creatures in the room crowded around to look at the mess of plastic shells and wiring.

“The way I figure it,” I began, “The Noctua need to be moved out of the way so that we can enter the sepulcher. So I asked myself: What would call a dozen or more owl warriors out to defend their holy space?”

The room went silent as I explained how we were going to make that very thing happen.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

I'll admit to feeling a little blessed to have hands with extremely limber digits, as compared to Shaw or Liam. But on days like today – where the wind cut like an icy knife against my face – there were times I'd have traded my numb fingers for a coat of fur or feathers. The sky was a low-hanging gray ceiling over dark evergreen columns and row upon row of withered sunflower stalks.

Once I shook off the effects of the transport, I looked around at the familiar landmarks to orient myself. The little pond, now trimmed at the edges with lacy fingers of ice, lay in front of me. I turned around slowly until I spotted the copse of trees to the north and west.

Shaw had once again unfurled his wings to keep from falling over. He grumbled something about 'having a word' with our wizard friend about improving his transport spells. Liam nudged Xandra with his moist deer nose, rousing the Parliamentarian from where she'd keeled over on the ground.

The owl seemed no worse for wear, though she flew unsteadily for a moment as she took off and perched atop the nearest tall pine. My neck gave a twinge as she rotated her head around in that unnaturally wide sweep that only owls could do. Then she fluttered back down to a low-hanging branch to speak to us.

"The way to Roost from this place lies almost straight against the winds of ice. It is not a far distance for this one to cover swiftly, but this one must also rally her people and spread word of the plan from she-from-another-world."

"That's what I figured," I said. I took off my backpack, set it on the ground, and began taking out the items I'd pre-fitted for each of my companions. "Let's get all of us kitted up before you have to go."

Back in my world I'd purchased four wireless radio headsets with adjustable headpieces and boom mics. The toughest part had been adapting the receivers, which came as hard plastic plugs for human earholes. The shop in Glendale had been able to swap them out for a full-sized leather ear cushion for Shaw and miniature foam pads for

Liam and Xandra.

Each unit had a hands-free mode where one could shrug or nudge the receiver to toggle the volume up and down, but I still had to jury rig a way to keep the sets from falling off my friends' different sized heads. Since I had no time to figure anything out I took the least elegant and simplest route. I brought a roll of duct tape and wound a single silvery oval of the stuff around each of their heads. It would be hard to scrape off without hands, and the residue left wouldn't be pleasant to remove either, but for now that was a small worry.

I'd carry the radio's base station powered by four AA batteries in my pack. With some luck, we'd be able to coordinate remotely over a couple hundred yards, assuming line-of-sight conditions. Then I finished up by using cargo net webbing to strap a second electronic device to Shaw's chest. I put on my own headset, switched on the base station, and spoke into the mic.

"Testing, testing," I stated, and each of the creatures around me jumped as my voice echoed in their ears. "Sounds like you can all hear me just fine."

"One has not seen sorcery like this!" Xandra cried. "It is as if one carries she-from-another world's voice in her head!"

Liam winced. "And we can hear you too, just as loudly."

"I shall try and keep mine own voice low," Shaw chuckled, as Liam quickly flexed his cheek a couple of times to turn the volume down. "Thy fayleene friend's ears seem over-delicate for this sort of work."

Liam glared back and seemed ready to retort, but I stepped in. "Enough, guys. We're on a tight enough schedule as it is."

"Farewell, then," Xandra said, in a voice just above a whisper. "This one's people shall be ready for your signal, should you need them."

"Good. If you don't hear my signal, stay hidden unless you see that we're in trouble. There's no use in putting your people at risk for no reason."

Xandra leapt from her branch and into the sky. She vanished into the low cloud cover. I repacked my pack, shifting a few items around

so that I could get at them more easily in the pockets of my cloak. I still had my shoulder holster and my gun with me, but I was able to stick the stun-wand into my belt.

"Okay, based on what Xandra told us we should be moving through areas that the Noctua regularly patrol from the air. Liam and I are going to stick to the cover of the trees as much as we can, but we'll need an eye in the sky. Let's see if these receivers have the distance we need."

"Aye, that's no problem," Shaw stated regally. With a mighty downbeat of his wings, he took to the air, vanishing into the sky above. A few seconds passed, then his voice came in faint but clear. "Canst thou hear me now?"

"There's no mistaking the gut-churning noise of a griffin," Liam acknowledged, a tight little smile on his deer face.

"'Tis all our prey must endure in the split second before we slaughter them," Shaw replied, in the same playful tone. I supposed that I couldn't blame them for having fun with the 'new magic', but it made me roll my eyes all the same.

"What's it look like up there?" I asked, trying to stick to business.

"All 'tis bright to mine eyes up here," the griffin replied. "The clouds lie thick, but there are gaps ahead. I shall be able to pass on a timely warning. Art thou sure that the Noctua shall not take exception to a griffin? I am hardly one to be missed aloft."

"Xandra said that griffins are rare up here, but they do hunt in the area. They'll note your passing but won't take alarm."

That's if they don't spot the silver wrapping of duct tape around your head, or all the oddball stuff strapped to your body, I thought wryly. I was stuck with praying that the local Noctua weren't going to be interested in getting close enough to Shaw to check him out too closely.

I dug into a pocket and pulled out a compass. But as soon as I held it up, Liam gave me a look that all but said 'oh, come on'. The Fayleene Protector snorted and sniffed the air, orienting himself. Then he indicated the way north and west with a toss of his antlers. He headed out at a fast walk, and I fell into line behind him as we

trudged into the trees.

The next hour or two passed in near silence, the only sounds being Shaw's occasional faint check-ins and the harsh pants of my breathing. Liam's hooves made no noise at all, even crossing leaf litter or the occasional two-inch-high drift of snow. The gray cloud cover grew more tattered, like a moth-eaten blanket, but fat white flakes began to swirl down from the ones that remained.

Liam did his best to keep us on the quickest route north and west, only making exceptions for my poor human form to walk around obstacles that he could have forded in a single bound. In fact, he was doing such a good job as a guide that I could tune out all but the plod of my feet. That left a sizable chunk of my brain free to examine the clues and questions that were swill swirling inside my head.

My mind immediately jumped to the gang-related murder that Esteban, Vega and I had worked just recently. Only it hadn't been a murder. Rather, the death had been a cover for a different crime, one that pointed towards illicit drug dealing. Andeluvia had presented me with the exact same thing as Southern California. Thea's supposed death had been a cover for the Noctua to imprison her and keep her out of sight.

But that opened a whole bunch of other questions, ones that I couldn't solve without a good deal of speculation, if at all. Why did the Noctua use a fire-breathing dragon to set the 'death scene', cover up that evidence, and pin the event on a wild wyvern? And even more pressingly, what purpose did imprisoning the Albess serve in the first place?

Imprisonment seemed like overkill to keep Thea from talking to me.

But it wasn't *just* to keep her from talking to me. King Fitzwilliam hadn't been able to speak with her either. And Xandra had indicated that none of the other owls knew where Thea was being kept under guard.

I decided to continue along that line of reasoning. After all, what if I had nothing whatsoever to do with what happened to Thea? Why would Raisah hold a holy figure like the Albess against her will?

The answer came in the form of a jaw-clenching *click* in my head.

Galen, when he first told me about the religious order of the Noctua, had said something that I hadn't paid attention to at the time.

The anointed leader of their Holy Order of the Sepulcher is Albess Thea.

Shortly afterwards, both members of the Gruesome Twosome had said something to Raisah when they'd wanted to carve me into bacon strips with their battle talons.

Release this one, Anointed.

And what had Perrin said to me, before he had died of aggressive anemia?

Some of the Noctua say I might come back as Anointed again…

In my world, to 'anoint' something meant to consecrate or bless it. But here, among Andeluvia's talking, tax-code writing owls, it meant something else. A claim to power, even holy dominion over the Hoohan.

A sequence of events flashed into high definition focus inside my head.

Thea grows old, unwell, and is restricted from seeing troublesome people like me or King Fitzwilliam. Raisah, who is called the 'Anointed' by her bodyguard, stakes her claim to power. Thea then disappears, and is claimed to have been murdered by some random, tragic accident. Finally, little Perrin – also one of these mysterious 'Anointed' owls – suddenly and rather conveniently dies after a long, wasting illness.

Liam and I were crossing rougher country now. The cliffs ahead began to draw near, but shrub and pine-choked gullies rippled out from the heights above, forcing us to scramble up and down steeper slopes. Shaw remained out of sight for the most part, sticking to what cloud cover was left, ranging slightly ahead of us but within headset range.

Something else occurred to me. Xandra had said that both Thea and Perrin shared what the Hoohan called the 'Marks of the Anointed'. At the time, I hadn't known what that meant. But now that I'd met both of them, the marks were as distinctive as stigmata. They had

similarly poor health, the same coloring, and most importantly, they had same thought and speech patterns that branded them as 'insane' among their own people.

Raisah lacked all these marks. But if she had the backing of enough of the Noctua on her own? It sure as hell looked like Raisah was staging a coup over the passive wings of the other Hoohan.

But I'd have thought that plotting and executing a coup should be a full-time job. Why was Raisah refusing to approve Fitzwilliam's budget, threatening to throw his kingdom into chaos? She hadn't made any demands. It was almost as if she wanted Andeluvia weak and divided.

Another *click*, and yet more things fell into place for me.

Xandra had warned us all. *The Noctua sense that the time of the Past War is drawing near. One heard of rumors…of talks in the shadows with the ones who are now arisen from the dark.*

All that was happening with the owls was yet another part of a grand plan to destroy Andeluvia, or at least one of the realms that would ally with it.

And that made stopping Raisah the top priority now.

"Look up ahead," Liam said, quickly jerking me back into the here and now. "The Sepulcher of the Eight Talons. I see it up by the base of the cliffs."

We'd come to the edge of a thick copse of fir trees and a stand of thorny shrubs dappled with bright red berries. The afternoon had melted away. Now the sky had begun its turn from bright slate gray to the steel gray of an evening filled with snow flurries. I knelt among the shrubs to be a little less conspicuous, and then pulled a small pair of binoculars from my pack. My fingers were a little numb and fumble-prone on the focus knob, but I soon dialed it in.

The opening to the sepulcher was a twenty-foot high trapezoid. A single piece of jet-black stone made up the lintel. That stone rested atop a pair of columns that sloped gently inward, making the bottom narrower than the top. The columns were covered in rounded, scoop-shaped marks that had been carved into the rock and colored with specks of long-faded paint.

Shaw's voice crackled urgently in my ear.

"Dayna," the griffin said, in a harsh whisper, "Keep to thy cover and do not move! A pair of the Noctua are on patrol, and moving with the speed of the wind towards thee!"

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Chapter Thirty-Four

The Noctua were moving with the wind. The same wind I felt gently blowing against my cheeks as it flowed off the heights above. That meant the two owls were just leaving the sepulcher.

It also meant the owls would be passing overhead any second.

Liam must have been in the same state of mind. Instead of making a run for the deeper woods, he sank down next to me, eyes anxiously scanning the sky. We sat and waited as the breeze kicked up a little, pelting us with a flurry of white flakes.

Given the rough terrain, we'd come up on our destination almost unexpectedly. I didn't think that there was much more than two hundred yards to the door at this point. At best, there was a 50-50 chance that using any magic would set off an alarm that would rouse the rest of the owls in the sepulcher.

However, if I had to use my gun, there was a one-hundred percent chance of everyone hearing the shot. So I slowly moved one hand inside my cloak and rested my forefingers against the smooth handle of the stun wand. I focused on my breathing and staying absolutely still. All while praying that the bright silver line of duct tape that I'd wound about Liam's head would look like just another patch of slate from above.

The seconds ticked by. More snow fell, pricking my skin with little icy needles.

Shaw's voice buzzed faintly in my ear. "They have passed thee by."

I let out a deep breath. "Gotcha. We're going to–"

"Bide!" Shaw let out a hiss. "They are circling."

More seconds ticked by. The soles of my feet threatened to cramp up, so I flexed them as best I could inside my hiking boots. Shaw let out a squawk that I recognized as a griffin curse.

"The Noctua have spotted thy heel print in a patch of snow. Were it not for our mission, I would applaud their skill."

"Great." I gritted.

“They are doubling back towards thee,” Shaw said resignedly. “I shall strike thy opponents down from above, ‘lest they harm thee and mine own vulnerable fayleene friend.”

“I am quite capable of protecting both Dayna and myself,” Liam objected. “The thin air must be affecting your mind and giving you heroic delusions again.”

Nice to see how technology changes things, I noted. *Now Shaw and Liam could insult each other over a longer distance.*

Aloud, I said, “Stay where you are, Shaw. I have a hunch we’re going to need to put our next part of the plan into action very quickly.”

“Art thou sure? We have seen neither horn nor wing feather from Xandra or her–”

The Noctua appeared like ghosts beside us.

One moment earlier, the branches in the fir tree to my side were empty. Now they bowed under the weight of two large owls. Their plumage was a mix of yellow and brown, with the occasional gleam of metal.

Not only did both wear battle talons, they also sported a pair of bronze-colored strips that ran the length of the front edge of each wing. I had no idea how these birds could fly with steel or bronze plate strapped to their bodies and feet, but the creatures in Andeluvia played by their own rules.

Rules which meant that we were fair game, right now.

“One has trespassed upon the sacred domain of the owls,” one said, in a gruff female voice. “Make peace with the foul gods your worship, for you shall be cleansed from this earth.”

“Well, that’s certainly direct enough,” I muttered.

“I am the Protector of the Fayleene,” Liam stated sternly. “Among my kind, we frown upon threatening those we meet in the wild.”

“We of the Noctua are not your kind, and we do not recognize the people of the fey here,” rasped the other one, in a nasally male voice. “If one wishes, one is allowed to run from us first. Then we cut each of you down by the neck.”

“That’s kind of you,” I said coldly. “It this a custom of yours?”

“Owls are not kind. And it is custom for predators to enjoy chasing prey before they kill it.”

I grimaced. “How long does one get to run?”

A shrug. “It shall all end the same, but we are feeling generous. Ten seconds this one shall give.”

“I’ll make use of it,” I said.

I stood up and moved as if to turn around and run. My fingers tightened on the grip of my wand. Liam coiled his legs under him, ready to spring.

I flung my cloak out as I whipped back around.

Wand in hand, I fluttered my eyes at the male owl.

I felt the slightest kickback as the wood *twitched* silently in my hand. The raptor fell like a stone.

The female owl leapt into the air. Liam sprang to cover me in case she dove at us. I raised my sights. Blinked three times in quick succession. I caught her just before she cleared the treetops. She plummeted to earth and hit the hard ground with a *whump*.

That wasn’t all. The air rang with a *SCREECH-SCREECH-SCREECH* that couldn’t have been anything but the Noctua’s magical alarm system.

“It was a boring conversation anyway,” I said wryly. “Shaw, we’re going to have company!”

“Then I shall begin thy deception,” he said confidently.

High overhead, Grimshaw switched on the second electronic device I’d brought to Andeluvia. This was a combination speaker system and vocal modulator, both powered by a six-volt lantern battery the size of a small brick. I’d already set the system to lower the griffin’s already raucous growls another couple of octaves while jacking up the bass to ‘seismic rumble’.

Liam and I quickly turned the volume on our headsets down to the minimum as Shaw inhaled. Then, from high above, he let out a bellowing roar that sounded like the second coming of Sirrahon!

I stuck the wand back in my belt and then put out a hand to Liam’s shoulder. Together, we crouched back down in the brush. The Noctua, who I could make out as yellow dots in the distance, had

already started to pour out of the trapezoidal entrance in the cliffs ahead. Now they gathered into a swirling, hooting swarm and arrowed themselves towards the source of the threat.

Inside, I let out a cheer. Earlier, I had asked myself what would pry the owls out of their crypt-like fastness to defend their holy space. And I'd already witnessed the answer when Liam's first Fayleene Ranger had decoyed the Gruesome Twosome from their perches on Sir Talish's estate: the sound of a wild dragon.

The owls shot upwards into the sky. I counted ten separate blurs as they disappeared into the cloud cover. Including the two that lay stunned nearby, that meant the Sepulcher of the Eight Talons lay completely open and undefended.

"Let's go!" I cried. Liam and I set out at a run.

Well, Liam set out at a run. With that effortless bounding gait that the fayleene had, he left me behind in an instant. The best I could manage was a kind of shambling lope as I fought my way up and down another pair of wooded slopes. I'd been hoping to get a lot closer to the sepulcher before unleashing Shaw's surprise, but so long as nothing else went wrong, we were still okay.

I staggered to a stop as Liam stood in my path ahead. He had his noble stag head raised, nose sniffing the wind.

"Something else is wrong," he said, divining the exact worst thing to say to me at that moment.

"What…what is it?" I huffed.

"I smell more owls."

We picked our way forward up the last few yards to the top of the rise. I got my binoculars out and immediately spotted Raisah's mask-like markings and another whole quartet of Noctua warriors. Beyond the top of the ridge Liam and I crouched on, the ground sloped steeply down. A wide, flat open area had been cleared in front of the stone opening leading inside the sepulcher. Raisah and her companions slowly orbited the open area, scanning for additional threats.

I bit my lip. I had thought about what I might do if this happened, and I still didn't like the odds. But it was better than anything else we'd ever get.

“Liam, I need another decoy,” I announced. “This is going to be up to you.”

He cocked his head and looked at me with his one bright green eye. “Are you sure? I know Thea’s scent. If you go in without me and they’ve moved Thea from the room Xandra showed us…”

That was a serious risk. I had light sources with me, but that would make me a slow-moving target if any Noctua remained inside. And without Liam’s nose to lead me back, it would be a hell of a lot easier to get lost in the labyrinth down there. But my decision was still an easy one.

Mostly because I didn’t have any choice.

“I might miss Thea, and I might get lost,” I admitted. “But I sure as hell can’t outrun an owl in mid-flight. And if I use my gun to start shooting Raisah’s people down, it may attract the other Noctua back here.”

Liam nodded. “You’re right, Dayna. No worries, I can lead these birds a merry chase through the woods like only a fayleene can.”

“Get ready, then.” I pulled out Galen’s wand, which was now down to its last charge.

I was tempted to stun Raisah, but I was worried that the Noctua would remain to guard their leader’s body. Instead, I picked one of the Noctua at the far edge of their clearing, off to the right by some thicker forest cover.

A squeeze and a triple-blink, and the owl went down. Liam vanished in a fawn-colored flash. He reappeared next to the clearing as his voice rang out bell-clear through the air.

“Are owls as blind in the day as bats are at night?” he taunted.

Raisah and her remaining three raptors screeched in reply and took off after the retreating stag. Further off, I heard yet another dragon-sized bellow as Shaw continued our original ploy to hold the Noctua’s attention.

In one motion, I threw Galen’s wand aside and drew my firearm. Then I shuffled my way down the final slope and came out into the clearing. Skin crawling, I crossed the wide expanse of flat, snow-lined gravel. I left a bunch of shoe tracks now, but I was beyond caring

about that. If I found Thea, nothing else would matter.

The opening to the Sepulcher of the Eight Talons seemed to frown on me as I stood before it. I took my gun's safety off. I was out of magic now, and out of options.

I took a breath as if diving into water of unknown depth.

Then I charged across the sepulcher's threshold and into the darkness within.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

The long, darkened hall led arrow-straight into the core of the cliff face. Distant roars projected by Shaw's dragon act did a weird double vibrato in my head. I could just make out the griffin's bellows in my earpiece, and I also heard it echo faintly along the stone walls of the entry chamber.

I skidded to a stop as the light failed. I didn't want to end up tripping over or running into something. Reaching out with my left hand, I found the wall. The rock face felt corpse-skin clammy to my touch. I crouched down and got ready to hunt for the flashlight I'd stuck in one of backpack's pockets.

It turned out I didn't need anything.

I waited there in the gloom. The entryway lay far behind, a distant smudge of iron gray. The air hung heavy with the smells of damp earth and even damper stone. It took until my heartbeat stopped pounding in my ears before I realized what I was seeing.

All around me the same mossy lichen I'd seen in the Roost of the Star Child lit up the walls with powder-blue bioluminescence. There wasn't a choir to back up the lightshow this time, but I was glad to see it all the same. It allowed me to focus on keeping my firearm at the ready while I went over the map in my head, concentrating on fighting back the panic of being lost or trapped down here. The scrape of my boots was as loud as the tramp of elephants in the near-darkness.

The entry chamber funneled into a tight 'choke point' of an opening, one where I could reach up and touch the ceiling with my outstretched hand. Soon after the air took on a new feeling of vastness, as if I were standing in an empty cathedral. The blue iridescence of the lichen faded away into the blackness above, and I hurried on through. I passed two more side-passages before coming to the third, where I bore first to the right, then to the left.

At one spot, Xandra had described crossing a band of 'soft stone'. When I crossed that point, my feet sank into a spongy, wet bed of

moss. Icy water flowed up over the tips of my boots, drenching the toes of my socks.

The sudden soaking almost made me cry out. But I clenched my teeth as I spotted a change in the light up ahead. This light shone yellow, not blue. It flickered from one of the openings in the rock on the left.

I checked it out against my mental map. It lined up with where Thea was supposed to be kept. I flattened myself against the right-hand side wall and eased my way forward as quietly as I was able. When I got close enough, I tried to peer inside.

Of course, the room was angled in such a way that I couldn't see a damned thing.

I gulped down another deep breath and took three running steps inside. I skidded to a halt, gun held in both hands. I stood half-crouched in a shooter's stance, heart whamming in my chest.

The square room stretched away upwards like a tall stone box, just as Xandra had indicated. It was bare, save for one piece of furniture. A circular slab of rock lay in the center of the room. The burnt-out remains of candles littered the slab's circumference. Foul-smelling drippings from the candles flowed down the sides, spreading out across the floor like waxen spider legs.

Albess Thea lay on the slab, her legs and wings each bound by a wrapping of stout rope. It looked as if I'd stumbled onto an avian version of black-magic sacrifice. But had I arrived too early or too late for the ceremony?

Thea answered that as she raised her head. Her eyes, weak with fatigue and pain, focused on me in recognition. She did not speak. But she flicked her eyes flicked upwards.

I risked a glance. A steel rung jutted out of the wall high overhead. The room's light source hung up there. A single cone-shaped torch sat burning merrily in a little metal fixture attached to the rung.

Nix sat by the flame. His armored battle talons curled firmly around the bar, and his eyes glinted coldly in the fire's reflection.

"So this one was right," he said, as if to himself. "This one knew

that the prey would come, given the right time. And the right bait."

With a quick movement, he snuffed out the candle with his wing tip.

No, damn it!

Suddenly blind, I dropped to my knees.

I was rewarded with a jolt of pain in my joints as I hit the floor. But that was all that saved my life.

A whirring *snicker-snack!* and my headset fell away. The earpiece dangled free on one side. The part that curved over the crown of my head clattered to the floor.

The spider-web feel of something soft and stringy falling across my face made me gasp.

Nix had come within a quarter-inch of slicing the top of my skull clean off. Instead, his talons had severed the headpiece and cut away a hank of my hair.

With a sick feeling, I dropped to my belly. Then I rolled to one side, squeezing the trigger like nobody's business. I emptied the magazine in a near panic. I fired blindly up into the blackness. Each report of the gun in the stone chamber was a thunderclap to my ears.

I rolled back over. Then I crawled like a blind worm across the floor, chest wheezing. I felt a slick trail of wax under a palm. I turned to follow it back to the source. My forehead smacked into the base of the slab. For a moment, I saw a nova burst in my skull.

"One almost wants to pity you," came Nix's cold voice. "None but one of the Hoohan can strike in the dark. And none but a Noctua warrior can make your death clean."

Part of me didn't want to speak. Part of me was afraid that Nix would home in on my voice and bring this little confrontation to an end.

Yet I wasn't up for kidding anyone, especially myself. The Hoohan could hear mice in the leaf litter of a forest. My harsh breathing in this little room wasn't going to be hard to pick out.

But maybe I could buy myself the time I needed.

"Why did you use a dragon?" I called out. "I mean, back on Sir Talish's land. Why use a dragon, then hide the evidence and claim

Thea was killed by wyverns?"

A snort. "One wishes to know trivia before one's demise?"

"Hey, it's my life," I shot back. "Indulge me."

I didn't have time to hunt for another magazine, let alone reload. Instead, I put my firearm aside. I reached for my pack, and my hand grasped a familiar-feeling object. One that I'd placed in one of the outer compartments for just such an occasion. I tugged the zipper open and slipped my hand around the handle.

"One does not indulge prey. Especially when the answer lies directly over one's head every day at court."

A clack of talons as they shifted against stone. Somewhere above and behind me.

I had maybe a second or two before Nix launched himself into a dive at me. So I pulled out the item that I'd purchased at the last minute from the camping goods store. The trigger of the flare gun fell against my index finger like it was custom-made for my hand. I aimed it upwards and shut my eyes as I *squeezed*.

The device made a high-pitched report, followed by the *POFF* of someone punching a feather pillow. Bright orange light jammed itself between the cracks of my eyelids as strontium nitrate and magnesium burned with a flesh-searing brilliance.

Nix began screaming.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Nix's screams came from a warrior whose huge, night-vision eyes had been seared into uselessness. I had no time to waste. I cracked open my own eyelids. Then I dropped the flare gun and scooped up my firearm. A single moment used to eject the spent magazine. Another to slam home a new one.

I risked a glance up. The flare's little parachute had gotten hung up so it remained suspended, casting a baleful glow over the proceedings. Thea let out a pain-filled moan, but I didn't dare attend to her yet.

Nix finally stopped screaming. He flew back and forth above me in a complete panic. The owl slammed into the walls again and again, slashing out with his talons and scoring the stone with deep gouges. A burble of curses and whimpers escaped from his beak. I'd never seen anything so vicious and pathetic at the same time.

I brought my gun up, sighted, and squeezed the trigger.

It took three shots to bring Nix down.

Then another shot to make him stop quivering.

I stuck the gun my holster and pulled out a pocketknife. In no time, I'd cut Thea free from her bonds. Her eyes gazed up at me blankly, still blinded by my flare.

"My dear child," she breathed, in her faint, summery voice. "Nothing has changed since we first met, Dayna. Dark be the reasons for your visit, but a joy it is to see you."

"Me too," I said, as I took off my pack and unzipped the main compartment. "We need to get out of here."

"Alas, I cannot walk, nor fly. The ones I called sisters and brothers were giving me my last ceremonies. I objected, so they tied me there. The bonds were tight, I cannot so much as feel my feet anymore…"

"You don't need your feet," I choked out. "I will carry you."

Thea gave a pleased little 'hoo!' at that.

I slipped my fingers around Thea's body, underneath her wings, and placed her as gently as I could into my backpack. She felt as light

and bony as little Perrin, but for now that was a benefit. I zipped up my pack so that only the Albess' head stuck out.

With Thea on my back, I picked up my gun and retraced my route through the expanse of the sepulcher. My low-light vision had been ruined by the shell burst of the flare, but I kept to the wall and relied on my memory to take me back. Another slosh amidst the mossy mire, then up and down some corridors, and then through the choke-point.

I picked up speed as I made my way down the long hall back to the exit. It was so dark outside now that I could barely make out a slightly lighter patch of black ahead. But a gust of cold air told me how close I was getting, so I ignored the *squish-squish* of my drenched socks inside my boots and pushed on ahead.

There were noises from outside. I pushed myself into a run, fearful that the Noctua were finally coming back to base, angry enough to spit tacks. The remaining piece of my headset buzzed in my ear. I didn't hear Liam or Shaw. Instead, I picked out a couple of different voices. Owl voices, it sounded like.

Who is that?

What do we do?

Where is she-from-another-world?

I burst through the trapezoidal entryway. My lungs inhaled the fresh night air, my skin felt the tingle of flakes again. Gravel rustled under the soles of my footwear. I got ready to grab for my medallion to transport away. I only needed a few more yards to get beyond the range of the Noctua's anti-magic wards.

With a *BANG*, I ran full-tilt into an invisible wall.

The impact drove the wind from my lungs and sent me sprawling. My earpiece popped free while my pack straps broke, spilling both backpack and wounded Albess across the rocks. The iron taste of blood filled my mouth as I bit my lip and crunched my tongue.

I fought my way to my knees again. I'd managed to hold on to my gun. I held it out, trying to see through my now-watery eyes.

A noose tightened cruelly around my neck. With my free hand, I grappled at my skin but felt no rope, no cord. And yet something held my windpipe in a vise, cutting off my air.

“Still depending on your other-worldly weapons to save you,” came a voice. “You are so very predictable. Throw your gun away.”

I choked as I tried to fight it. Yet my nails gripped nothing but air around my neck. Thea lay on the ground nearby. She let out a groan.

I tossed my weapon away into the darkness. The worst part was, I recognized the voice. I’d always figured that he’d show up again, at the worst possible time.

Just my rotten luck.

The dun-colored form of a proud stag stepped out of the woods at the edge of the clearing. My eyes went wide and I tried to speak. Only the hiss of air escaped by throat.

Wyeth, the eldest son of the Fayleene Protector Quinval, stood before me. His pleasant-looking deer face had an undeniably cruel, smug look. The top third of one of his antlers gleamed as if it were made of glass crystal.

“Yes, that’s right,” Wyeth gloated, as he noticed my gaze. “You thought you shot part of my antler away, didn’t you? It’s come back stronger than before. Just like me. Pity that you’ve only learned this right before I choke the life out of you.”

The tips of the fayleene princeling’s antlers glowed with magical power. The two-finger pinch on my windpipe expanded to a full fist. I let out a gasp. Though I was already on my knees, I came within a hair’s breadth of falling forward onto my face.

An insistent buzz of sound came from my earpiece, which dangled by its cord on my chest. I scooped it up. I cupped the little plastic nub in my palm, just making out the tinny, ghostly words that came through.

She-from-another-world is in trouble!

We see her!

We’re coming!

“I’m going to keep my hold on your throat until you’re dead,” Wyeth went on, as he picked his way down the slope to stand atop the gravel only twenty of so yards in front of me. “Then I’ll do the same for the Albess. I’ll leave both your bodies for our friend Liam to find. So that my friends and I can do what all the truly fit do with the

unworthy: feast upon their pain."

I gripped the earpiece in one hand and held it to my chest. Blackness began to encroach on the edges of my vision. My head felt filled with fluid and ready to burst. I stretched my free hand out towards my tormentor. As if beckoning, pleading.

"You wish a last word?" he chuckled, reveling in this moment. "Go ahead. What is it that you wish to beg from me?"

The pressure eased off my throat just a bit. I gasped a reed-thin sip of air before I spoke.

"Just…stay…still."

Wyeth's brow furrowed. "What?"

Like armored, feathered bullets, Xandra and her fellow owls shot past me and towards Wyeth's face. The princeling had time to register shock.

Then they were on him.

Talons sheathed in metal like scythes slashed at the fayleene. Xandra and another owl gouged scalpel-like grooves in his scalp as they screamed by. Four other owls aimed their hammer-blows at Wyeth's crystalline antler. It shattered with the sound of a cannonball dropped through plate glass. The magical glow that had tipped his antlers winked out.

The hold on my throat vanished. I took big, ragged gulps of air as I staggered to my feet. I couldn't find my gun so I forgot about it, turning to scoop up the Albess from where she still lay on the ground, knocked almost senseless.

Wyeth shook off his attackers. He let out a cervine roar of outrage as he shook the jagged stub of his newly wrecked antler. A strip of his scalp dangled from his skull, streaming blood across the snow, spattering his insane deer face. He charged towards me, hooves clattering as he threw up a roostertail of rocks in his wake.

I dug frantically for my medallion. Two of my fingers made contact and pressed the cold disk of silver between the pads. I thought of my house, praying that I'd gotten outside the range of the anti-magic wards.

Wyeth's charge vanished in a thunderclap of white light and

throat-scouring ozone. I'd never been so happy to get that bleach tang in my nostrils before. One, two seconds of time suspended in the travel between worlds, and it was over.

I lost my grip on Thea. We tumbled across the expanse of my living room carpet.

I came to rest with a *thump* as my shoulders ended up against the base of my poor, abused couch. I couldn't complain. Compared to most any other surface in my house, at least it was padded with soft cloth. Thea rolled to a stop against my stomach, her horn feathers tickling my nose.

The Albess let out a little cough, followed by a groan as she flexed her talons. At least it wasn't a groan of pain. It sounded more like one of nausea and general misery.

I raised my head and looked around. Night had fallen. The glow of streetlamps filtered in hazily through the heavy curtains.

Then the ceiling light switched on with a click. This time I was the one who let out the groan as the bulbs dazzled my eyes.

"What in blazes is goin' on here?" came a voice. "Dayna, is that you?"

Shelly Richardson stumbled out of the bedroom, still dressed in her work pants and tattered sweatshirt. She looked startled as she saw me sprawled out on the floor. But her jaw only dropped as she spotted the jumbo-sized Great Horned Owl I had curled up against me.

"Shelly," I sighed. "There's a lot going on that you need to know."

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Admittedly, I never spent much time thinking about how I would introduce my friends from Los Angeles to the mythical creatures of Andeluvia. Esteban had met Grimshaw, but that had been by accident as much as anything else. Shelly had met Galen, Liam, and even Destry – but only under circumstances where they had been concealed or disguised.

This time was different. And believe me, this was not the way I anticipated introducing one of my best friends to the equivalent of a holy woman in the shape of an orange-colored owl.

I managed to prop myself up on elbows and sat up with my back against the ratty base of my poor, griffin-abused couch. Then I put a hand out to help Thea right herself. The way the Albess reeled, it was obvious the transport spell had still scrambled her balance. I could only hope that she wouldn't regurgitate a pellet or any other kind of owl waste on my carpet.

"Albess Thea," I began, extending my hand in Shelly's direction. "This is one of my best friends in the 'Land of the Angels', Shelly Richardson."

Thea spread her wings and bowed as best as she was able. Shelly looked impressed.

"Well, I'll be," she chuckled, as if surprised I'd managed to train a mere bird to perform on command.

"Shelly, let me introduce you to Albess Thea," I went on. "The Albess is the ruler of the Hoohan, the anointed leader of their Holy Order of the Sepulcher, and the head of Parliament for the royal court of Andeluvia."

My friend spread her arms and bowed back in good humor. "That sounds like a church going bunch of titles to me. Mighty fine to meet you, Albess Thea."

"And it is fine to meet you, Shelly of Richard's Son," Thea returned, in her best grandmotherly voice. "I wish that my feathers were in better trim to greet you. I have been through dark times."

Shelly's grin froze.

"Dayna, did you just…"

I shook my head. "Shelly, this is what I've avoided telling you for some time now. Thea's from the same place as Galen."

"She's from…heaven?"

"No. It can be pretty hellish at times, actually," I admitted. "Andeluvia is a real place, like Los Angeles, but it's got people and… well, beings who look like animals we're familiar with. But they're as intelligent as you or I."

Shelly continued to stare, her already taxed brain scrambling to connect the dots.

"Intelligent I may be," Thea breathed wearily, "But I know not where we are, Dayna. I cannot be much use to you in my condition."

"You're safe," I assured the Albess. "This is my world, and this my demesne, my castle. No one knows that you are here. I'm hoping to get you the help you need."

The word 'help' seemed to get Shelly over the hump, so to speak. She blinked, and then knelt next to us. She reached out gingerly and stroked Thea's wing as she spoke.

"You do look like you've been ridden hard and put away wet. Miss Thea, I'm a veterinarian. That is, I'm a doctor for many kinds of animals. Like you." Shelly shook her head. "I'm sorry, that came out unkindly."

"You are not an unkind person," Thea said. Her words reminded me achingly of Perrin.

"If it's all right…may I treat you? I promise to be gentle. You won't bite, kick or scratch if I examine you?"

"I shall refrain as best I am able."

"Okay, then."

I got out of the way as Shelly touched Thea under her wing, at the breastbone, the neck, and next to the base of her beak.

"Lordy, lordy," she muttered. "When did you last have a good meal? Badly underweight, and signs of dehydration to boot."

"The Albess has been unwell for a while," I put in. I wasn't sure if I should share personal details about Thea's medical history, as it

seemed rude, but I did mention her recent treatment. “I had to bring us here in a hurry. Thea’s been held in captivity for at least a couple of weeks. I doubt they gave her full rations.”

Thea let out a gasp as Shelly’s touch moved to the top of her feet. “My joint burns as feeling returns. I had been roughly bound, before Dayna freed me.”

Shelly nodded. “I see the ligature marks. Bad scrapes there, you’ll be needin’ some cream for that. So long as the feeling returns, you’ll be okay. You really should get some food and water in you, Miss Thea.”

“Perhaps, but above all I wish the twin blessings of warmth and sleep.”

“Then we’ll get you that right away.” Shelly looked over to me. “Dayna, you got anything that we can convert into a nest of sorts for my patient? I want her in the room you gave me for a spell. And do we have a space heater?”

I nodded. “The space heater’s in the garage, I’ll go fetch it. As for a nest…how about you look in my hall closet? There’s a couple things you might be able to use.”

“That’ll be fine, Dayna.”

With Shelly’s approval, I went out to the garage and located my old space heater under a pile of bric-a-brac by the chest freezer. I coiled up the cord around it and lugged the boxy item back into the house. I found my two impromptu house guests in the spare bedroom.

Shelly had pressed my shallow, dish-shaped laundry basket into service as Thea’s nest. The woven-reed oval was just big enough for her, especially after Shelly had swaddled the Albess in a selection of my spare blankets. I plugged in the heater, spun the dial to ‘on’ and with a low buzz, waves of warmth began to fill the room.

Thea sighed. “There was a time where I thought I would never be warm again. Thank you, Dayna. Thank you, Shelly.”

“Rest easy, Albess,” I replied. Shelly and I left the room and quietly closed the door. I don’t think my hand had left the knob before the elderly owl’s snores cut the air.

Shelly and I made it into my kitchen before collapsing at the seats

around the dining table. My friend rubbed a finger under the dark bags that still smeared across the bottom of her eyes. She scowled critically at her fingers, as if noticing for the first time how raw and scabby they'd become. Sighing, she looked over at me, with my disheveled hair and swollen lower lip. She laughed merrily. "We cut quite the figures right now, don't we? All ready for an early morning sermon at the Church of Hard Knocks."

"I'd say that we'd be welcome in the first set of pews," I agreed ruefully.

Even with how drained I felt, I couldn't help but be cheered by Shelly's humor. It felt like I'd gotten a little of my old friend back. For her part, Shelly still seemed scuffed and dinged up by her recent experiences, as well as too thin. But the bone-tired, semi-conscious woman I'd pulled out of the barrio was harder to make out.

"You don't have to tell me everything about where your owl friend comes from yet," Shelly allowed, "But I need to know her health history, at the very least."

I decided to tell her about Thea's past complaints to me regarding insomnia, difficult urine flow, balance issues, and arthritis. Then I quickly sketched out the role of the Hoohan in the world of Andeluvia, my suspicions of a power-play made against Thea, and the likely length of her recent captivity.

Shelly took this all in with aplomb. As I talked, she got up and went to the cupboard. She filled two cups with tap water and then set them to heat in the microwave.

"At least I know what I need to help Miss Thea now," she said. "It'll sound strange, but…doin' stuff for people has been the only thing that has put my mind halfway to ease lately."

"It doesn't sound strange. Thea's world is why you've been having that recurring dream as of late." My friend looked up sharply at that. "It's your mind's way of handling memories that were half-erased. I'd brought three of my friends to work a few weeks ago: Galen, Liam, and Destry."

"Galen's the hunky one, I recall that well enough." The microwave pinged, so Shelly brought the steaming cups of water to the table. We

each took a chamomile tea bag from a decorative box I'd stuck next to the napkin holder. "Where I come from, a hard man like that is good to find."

"He's a good man. He's also a wizard. And a centaur."

Shelly paused for a second before letting out a snort. "So that's what you meant when you said he was 'hung like a horse'! Good lord, I don't know if I can take any more. Who were the other two?"

"Liam's the ruler of the fayleene, a race of magical deer." Shelly nodded with understanding as we both dunked our packets of tea in the water. She followed hers up with a couple scoops of sugar. "The last one, Destry, looked like a big black horse, but he's actually a 'pooka' – an ethereal being who can manipulate minds. We got backed into a corner by Bob McClatchy, Destry did some spell work that knocked his gears askew, and you got caught in the backlash."

Shelly chewed that over for a moment as we sipped our tea. The warm water felt good flowing down my pinched throat. It didn't feel like it was going to be bruised the next day, but it ached all the same.

"So I got…ensorcelled, kind of?" Shelly asked. "That's why I've been goin' a little loco in the coco?"

"I wouldn't put it like that–"

"Oh, horsefeathers! Dayna, I'm no shrinking violet. This is the first time anything's made sense to me in a month!"

I nodded. "You're taking this…well, better than I thought you would."

"Oh, I don't know." Shelly finished off her tea in a gulp. "I still feel like my wits are half-scrambled. I don't rightly know how to think about any of this. Whether I should be angry at you for gettin' me spell-shocked, or grateful for rescuing me. But a talking owl? *That* I can understand, at least."

"You can?"

"Sure. I've read or watched everything from *Winnie the Pooh*, you know. Been a big fan of it since I was a kid." A thought occurred to her. "If you had to keep me from learnin' about this dream-world, I figure that I better keep quiet as well. So no takin' Thea to the vet unless things get desperate, right?"

“Well, not everyone reads Pooh.” I looked at Shelly more seriously. “I do feel responsible for what happened to you, though. It’s why I haven’t told anyone that you’re here, yet. Only Esteban knows for sure, and he’ll keep things quiet.”

Shelly looked down at her lap for a moment. “That’s probably a smart thing to do at this point. Till I get my head screwed back on straight, at least.”

“Or you’re not as sleep-deprived. I have more pills if you need them.”

“Don’t think I will. Now that I have someone to care for, it puts me at ease.” Shelly reached across the table and held my hand in hers. “And you need some care, too. Sleep for now, food for later.”

Shelly herded me back to my room over my weak protestations. I shrugged off my clothes and set aside my still-wet boots and socks in the bathroom, and lay on the bed. My brain was awhirl with the events of the day. I’d never get to sleep.

At least, that’s what I thought right before my eyes closed and I passed out before I could count to five.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

The alarm clock I had by the bed buzzed me awake at seven in the morning. Which was interesting, because I didn't recall setting it. I groaned, rolled over, and smacked the damned thing with my palm.

I got a click from the 'off' button, as well as the rustle of paper under my hand.

That got my attention. I pried my eyes open, rubbing the sleep sand from them, and switched on the light. A note had been taped to the alarm clock.

Frowning, I stood up and looked out the open bedroom door. Everything was quiet. Dim light filtered through the door jamb of the adjoining guest room. I pulled the note off the clock and then squinted to read it.

Dayna –

Sorry to wake you. You can't miss the OME Department Roundup. The directors will notice if you're not there.

I got breakfast for you. Found just enough for lunch for me and our owl friend. Bring home some food for dinner we can all eat. Something that will stick to ribs.

I checked your cupboards and frigid-air. Don't you ever SHOP for food? I am going to teach you how to cook. For real. You have no butter, bacon, or flour ANYWHERE.

Don't worry about me and Miss Albess Thea. She is in good hands with an old sawbones like me, ha-ha.

We will talk when you get home. That owl is one wise lady.

– Rochelle

To my credit, I'd gotten used to enough strangeness in my life that my first thought was: *Shelly's first name is actually Rochelle?* We'd been friends for years now, and I'd never seen her sign a note that way. It seemed so out of place on my down-home friend, a name fit more for a French noblewoman.

Of course, what it told me was: Shelly *trusted* me with her secrets, the way I was now trusting her. And I wouldn't let her down for any reason on earth.

That made me feel good for the first time in a while. In fact, except for a few aches and pains, I felt better rested than I'd been in days. And no wonder. While night had fallen when I'd brought Thea back from Andeluvia, it hadn't been the wee hours in the morning. Thanks to Shelly, I'd gotten ten hours of pure sleep.

I headed for the bathroom to take care of my morning toilette. The first thing I noticed was that my stinky, wet socks and boots had vanished. A freshly laundered set of bath towels had appeared in their place. I peeked behind the shower curtain. Not only was the tub clean, the faucet gleamed in a way that I hadn't seen since I'd first moved into my place.

After a quick rinse-off I examined myself critically in the mirror. I was able to change my hair style so that my impromptu trim thanks to a Noctua warrior didn't make me look like a mental patient. Even better, my throat didn't show ligature marks from Wyeth's choke-spell, so no one would be calling Suicide Prevention to intervene on my behalf. My lower lip was still swollen from where I'd bitten it, but everyone would think I had a fever blister or something.

I went over to my closet and selected clean clothes for the day. My Andeluvian duds had vanished into the same Shelly Richardson Twilight Zone realm as my socks and boots. Of course, the worst that would happen is that they would end up cleaned and pressed.

That 'worst' segue made me stop and think for a moment. I took out my medallion, looking at it closely. At my request, Galen had added a little 'marker' to the spell that carried me and others between worlds. The medallion took on a very faint glow when I had less than three charges left, and the 'low battery' light was definitely there this morning.

I considered. I knew that Shaw and Liam could handle themselves, but it was terribly temping to blip back to their world to check on them. The problem was, if Galen wasn't around, then I could be stuck in Andeluvia with no way home – precisely when Shelly and Thea

needed me the most. So I tucked the medallion back under my top. Then I grabbed the sandwich that Shelly left for me and tucked one of Perrin's remaining feathers into a plastic bag to bring into work.

The traffic gods of Los Angeles decided to be kind to me this morning. I made it to the office with enough time to stop by the chem lab. One of the technicians working there owed me a favor, so I asked him to do a quick analysis on the feather as I left for the OME Department 'Round Up'. Once a month, the directors called an all-hands meeting to go over 'departmental concerns' that could range from specific caseloads to the brand of diet sodas in the vending machines.

It turned out that Shelly's disappearance was a net benefit to me that day. No one asked me to present anything. The department heads simply gave me an awkward set of 'condolences' and hoped that the LAPD was up to the task of finding her. For my part, I did my best to look simultaneously worried and brave until the meeting let out, just before lunchtime.

I went back to my office at a fast walk and spent the morning plowing through the piles of paperwork threatening to engulf my desk like a carnivore made of wood pulp. Finally, I sent out a trio of emails.

The first was to notify the admin staff that I was leaving a couple of hours early today for 'mental health reasons'. The next went to Detective Cohen (with a carbon-copy to Esteban). I let Max know that, while we didn't find Shelly at the soup kitchen in the *barrio azul*, I'd asked the supervisor there to let me know when she showed up again. The final one was a roundabout thank-you to Esteban to let him know that everything at my house was 'going fine'.

Plausible deniability was the watchword of the day.

I was feeling pretty good about the way I was handling things by the time I got two messages in return. Detective Vega thought it worthwhile to tell me that Bob McClatchy's people were 'going to the mats' to help him unseat his rival for the Police Commissioner job.

The other message came from the chem lab. It made my heart sink like a stone.

That was enough work stuff in my head for the day. I shut

everything down, locked up my office, and put in a call to a place on Sunset that would fit the bill for some ‘stick to your ribs’ takeout.

Shelly typified the ‘meat-and-potatoes’ kind of eater. Technically, I suppose that the Albess was one as well, but I wasn’t about to visit the local pet store to pick up some mice for her, let alone bake them into a tart. Instead, I drove down to one of the few Swedish places I knew and picked up a king-sized order of meatballs in brown cream sauce, potato dumplings, a selection of side dishes ranging from yellow pea soup to gravlax, and a chilled bottle of lingonberry juice.

I beat the rush hour traffic home and managed to balance the heavy tray of food in my arms as I pushed my way back into the living room. To my surprise, I heard conversation and even laughter from the kitchen.

I made my way to the counter and sat my burden down, curious as to what I would see.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Shelly sat at the dining table looking as happy and relaxed as I'd ever seen her. Thea perched on the back of one of the chairs, also looking remarkably improved. While both women still looked frail and drastically underweight neither had the stretched look of nervous exhaustion anymore.

"Oh, sit yourself down and let me take care of all that!" Shelly fussed, as she got up and began fussing over the mass of bags, plastic containers, and tin foil that I'd set aside. I bowed to the inevitable and pulled a third chair over to the table.

"You look much improved, Albess," I ventured.

"My thanks must go to your friend," the Albess said, adding a delicate, thankful *coo*. "I only wish that she had been Court Physician many years ago. She is most skilled."

"Oh, that wasn't nothin'," Shelly demurred. "Just old-fashioned medicines and a little judgement on when to use 'em."

That surprised me. "Medicines? I don't have much here at the house."

Shelly explained as she dug out my casserole spoon and began transferring contents onto platters and plates. "I called in a favor from a local vet tech I know. And don't worry, she didn't know I was missing so our secret is still safe. Most all of Miss Thea's symptoms were caused by chronic dehydration and inflammation, so I had my vet friend drop off a 'script of avian-equivalent prednisone, which knocked out the latter."

"A miracle substance," Thea declared, with a bob of her head. "My feet and wings do not ache anymore!"

"As for the dehydration, I found that you actually have some food, or at least ingredients for food, hidden away in your kitchen. A little baking soda, salt, and clover honey in water, and I whipped up some homemade Pedialite. That not only addresses the water issue, but it'll make most anyone feel more even-keel."

"You have my thanks as well as Thea's," I said honestly. "And you

look a lot better as well, Shelly."

"I *feel* a lot better," Shelly agreed, as she set out glasses of juice, napkins and silverware. "I thought I was helping Miss Thea, but she ended up helping me much more. Matter of fact, I feel like my old self again. Right as rain and full of ginger pop."

I gave the Albess a hopeful glance. "Did you…"

"We owls do have a small amount of magic," Thea admitted. "Yet, I did very little. Your friend has a practical mind, and a healthy one. All that was needed was to make clear what had been unclear."

"All that was needed was to make clear what had been unclear," Shelly repeated, with a sigh. "You make it sound like a Sunday song, Albess. *I once was lost, but now am found; I once was blind, but now I see*."

I beamed at that. "I guess I was wrong not to let you know about Andeluvia before. You've handled the knowledge surprisingly easily. I thought…well, that you might have found the concept of Andeluvia difficult to square."

Shelly brought over plates heaped high with golden potato dumplings and Swedish meatballs. She sat down and let out a chuckle. "Well, I'm not sayin' that I expected this. But what are magic 'owls' but one more piece of God's creation? I mean, it ain't in the Bible, but then I figure that there's got to be room in the Good Book to add an appendix, or something like that."

Thea let out a series of 'hoos!' as she joined Shelly in laughter. Then the Albess dexterously took up a spoon in one foot, scooped up a sauce-drenched meatball, and took a cautious bite.

"Delicious!" she pronounced, finishing off the rest in three more snaps of her beak. "Next time, all we need is to add some ground mouse, and it would be perfect."

I shuddered at that, but decided not to comment.

My decision to go for Swedish smorgasbord turned out to be a good one. Not only did everyone devour portions of the dumplings, meatballs, soup, and cured salmon, both Shelly and the Albess went for thirds. Even though I'd skipped lunch, I called it quits after a second helping and stuck with the occasional sour-tart sip of

lingonberry drink. I had news to share, but I hated to break the good mood that prevailed at the table for a change.

"The Albess has been kind enough to fill me in on a lot about her world," Shelly informed me, as she polished off the last of the gravlax. "That kingdom you work with, it sounds nice and all, but maybe a little bit big for their britches."

"How do you figure that?" I asked.

"Why else did they keep the name of the kingdom the same as the name of their entire world? I guess it's simpler just to call everything 'Andeluvia'." She considered. "Then again, more than a few of my folks think everyplace from Canada to Argentina is just 'America', so maybe it's just laziness."

"I always thought it was just lack of creativity," I said with a laugh. "After all, the city around Fitzwilliam's palace is simply called 'the Capitol'."

"Well, from what Miss Thea says, I think you ought to take the Forensic Examiner's job that Fitzwilliam has dangling out there before he pulls it back."

I coughed at that. "Actually, Thea's successor refused to release Fitzwilliam's budget over that, so the King decided to make me a Dame."

The Albess gasped at the news. She spread her wings and bowed as deeply as she was able to while stuffed with not-enough-mouse Swedish meatballs. "That is a kingly deed, in truth. Dame Chrissie, we are honored by your presence."

Shelly's jaw dropped. I tried to wave her off, but she got up and dropped a surprisingly feminine curtsey. "Well, I'll be…" she breathed.

"Please, it's not all that it's cracked up to be," I begged off, urging my friends to sit back down or refrain from further bowing. "The only advantage we're going to get from my promotion is the ability to call in an escort to make it to the throne room."

Shelly went quiet and serious at that. "What do you mean, Dayna?"

"I take it the Albess has explained what is going on between her

and Raisah, the current ‘Anointed’ who is running the Noctua, and through them, the Hoohan?” Shelly nodded, so I went on. “Albess, are you aware of what happened to Xandra’s son? Of what he was?”

I got a sage nod in reply. “That owlet had shown so much promise. He showed the Marks of the Anointed at an early age. If I hadn’t been so ill, so consumed with my own demons, I would have helped him understand his place in life.”

“What would that be?” Shelly asked.

“To ascend to the position of Albess, of course.” Thea shook her head sadly. “But no. Raisah showed me the owlet’s feathers. The little one had seen no more than a handful of summers, but he passed away from the same infirmities that plague all the Anointed.”

“He had infirmities, Albess,” I said, hating to give out dreadful new information. “But that is not why he died.”

Thea let out an angry-sounding ‘hoo!’. “I wish to know more. Is this truth?”

“I received confirmation from my chemical analysis laboratory this afternoon,” I sighed. “They confirmed my worst suspicions. Perrin’s feathers contained a ridiculously high level of a poison called ‘thisulfinate’. It was more than enough to overwhelm his fragile system.”

The Albess fluttered from her perch down to the kitchen floor. Her talons made *skrak-krak* sounds on the linoleum as she paced back and forth.

“I saw a snake, and failed to strike at its head.” She grew more agitated as she paced. “Raisah has always wanted to supplant me. I did not think she would go so far, but I should have known better. She sent a dragon after me, then corrupted my bodyguard and poisoned an innocent owlet in her quest for power.”

“So Raisah sent a dragon?” I asked. “Only afterwards did your bodyguards turn on you?”

“Nix and Nox are repugnant creatures, true, but they did their duty. They drove off the dragon that attacked me as I stopped to drink at a forest pool. I was stunned by a blow of the beast’s tail. Only afterwards, when I awoke, did I discover that I was a captive in the

Sepulcher of the Eight Talons. And that they were my new jailors."

"Poisoning youngsters to get power," Shelly shook her head. "This Raisah and her people are nasty pieces of work."

"One is dead already, thanks to Dayna," Thea fumed. Her beak clacked in frustration. "The other two must perish as well. If I have to rouse the loyal Hoohan in civil war against the usurper, so be it! I will have revenge on those who wronged my kind and my kin!"

I'd never seen the Albess angry before. It was startling to watch. I swallowed, and did my best to keep my voice even-toned.

"In my world, there's a saying. That revenge is a dish which is best served cold."

The Albess stopped her pacing. "*Revenge is a dish best served cold*. That is a marvelous phrase, but what exactly does it mean, Dame Chrissie?"

"We need to move decisively, but coolly. Pushing your people into armed conflict serves no one but the Creatures of the Dark."

"You seem so sure of that," Thea muttered, but she motioned with a wing for me to go on.

"We need to present you in front of Fitzwilliam's court tomorrow morning. Your presence will prove once and for all that Raisah lied under oath. If we call the representatives of Parliament there as well, it should discredit Raisah in the eyes of your people, as well as the owl's most important client state."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Shelly objected. "Thea, I know you're feelin' better, but you're still not what I'd call in tip-top shape. If this Raisah is willing to kill kids, you don't think that she'll respond violently?"

"It's a risk, but one we have to take, Shelly. Both Fitzwilliam's kingdom and the realm of the Hoohan will shatter into anarchy or civil war if we don't act quickly."

"The Noctua are great warriors, but not invulnerable," Thea asserted. "In a closed space, with armed knights and the Court Wizard as opposition? I think that we shall have a decided advantage."

She sounds confident, I thought. *I just don't know if it's going to be that easy.*

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Chapter Forty

Dawn came warm and sunny to Los Angeles.

A cool orange line of light burned itself under the bottom crack of the garage door. After I'd donned my Andeluvian outfit, I busied myself by digging into the gun case I'd secured inside the trunk of my car. Wyeth had made me toss my original firearm away, but I wasn't about to return to Andeluvia without some kind of weapon.

Back when I'd first met Galen, Shaw, and Liam, I'd qualified on a 9mm pistol as per LAPD regulations so that I could go to both secured and unsecured crime scenes in the field. But I still hadn't purchased a firearm. That changed when Esteban all but forced me to take his spare Glock. It turned out that having a firearm saved my life more than once in the past. So, I'd filled out the requisite transfer forms to switch ownership of that handgun to my keeping. But since I liked the 'feel' of other weapons, I'd purchased a different handgun and kept this one as a spare.

Little did I know how handy that bit of forethought would turn out.

I took a moment to re-familiarize myself with the slightly different trigger and safety configuration of the Glock. Making sure it was loaded, I placed it and a spare magazine into my shoulder holster. Then I went back inside, fingering my transport medallion as I did so.

Shelly had all but forced a steaming-hot bowl of pea soup and the remaining meatballs on me and Thea for breakfast. My stomach hadn't woken up yet, but my friend was right. The Albess and I needed refueling, especially if it looked like conflict was ahead, so I dug in and cleaned my plate without argument.

"Shelly, I'm going to be worried about you all day," I admitted, as I made the last adjustments to my holster. The extra magazine tended to make the entire package bulge under my cloak. "Are you sure you want to return to the public eye?"

She let out a snort. "*You're* worried about *me?* You're the one who's about to jump into a war zone, after all."

“Should conflict break out, the Hoohan and the forces of Andeluvia shall prevail handily,” the Albess said offhandedly. “I am also not worried about your return, Shelly of Richard’s Son. You are as hale and healthy as ever, sound in body as well as mind.”

“Well, Miss Thea, I see Dayna’s point. It ain’t about my health, it’s about the ruckus I’ve kicked up by being gone. But I’ve got it covered. I’m familiar with the psych center over at First Samaritan, so I’ll check myself in and let them ‘evaluate’ me while I let my friends and family know I’m alive. They’ll keep me under observation for forty-eight hours to make sure I’m not a threat to myself or anyone else before I can go back home.”

“Do you think the OME will let this one slide?” I asked, concerned. “They treated me pretty rough. I don’t want you to run into bigger problems.”

“Horsefeathers, Dayna. I’ll kowtow to the bigwigs at the OME and let ‘em know I had a mental lapse, and that I took unannounced leave until I heard that you and Detective Esteban were looking for me. I can deal with probation and suspension, big deal. There just ain’t that many people around with my qualifications, so they’re not going to up and fire me.”

I gave my friend’s arm a last squeeze. “If you’re sure, then I’ll stop worrying.”

Shelly returned the squeeze. “You got enough on your plate as-is.” Thea fluttered to my side, perching on the arm of the couch. Shelly extended a hand palm up to her. “Thank you…for everything, Miss Thea. I hope we get a chance to meet again.”

“I echo your wishes, my friend,” the Albess replied, resting an outstretched wing on Shelly’s palm for a moment. “The divine power that fuels the universe has many ends, and we can only see so many of them.”

“Ready?” I asked Thea. She nodded, so I squeezed the medallion, concentrating on an image of my tower office.

A flash-bang of white, and we arrived in front of the room’s hearth. Thea spread her wings and flew unsteadily to perch on one of the rafters that held up the dunce-cap roof. I reeled, but managed to

steady myself against the large slate blackboard Galen had brought over a couple of days ago. As I tucked the medallion away, the red glow it emitted told me that the magic powering it had been totally depleted.

The Wizard who could recharge it stepped away from where he had been fixing something only a few paces from the door. Looking back over his shoulder, Galen's hooves made a loud clatter on the stone floor as he did a double take.

"Albess!" he cried out. "I am positively ecstatic to see you again!"

Thea let out a gentle chuckle. "Give thanks to my rescuer, Dame Chrissie."

Galen made as if to bow to me, but I waved him off. "Formalities later. Do we have any news about our friends? Liam and Shaw had to decoy away the Noctua. Xandra and her fellow owls went up against Wyeth, and I have no idea how that turned out."

"Rest assured that all are safe, but out of reach for the moment," Galen informed me. "Shaw was pursued all the way back to the borders of the aerie. Liam, for almost as long. Raisah and her companions only turned back when he crossed into the Grove of the Willows."

That startled me more than I cared to admit. These owls had kept on tracking their quarry for hours – in Shaw's case, several hours. It all smacked too much of zealotry to me.

"Finally, I received a message by courier from the Roost of the Star Child, just before dawn," the centaur added. "Xandra and her people managed to drive off Wyeth with no loss to themselves. But they are fearful of retribution from the Noctua. As we speak, they have evacuated all but those too old or young to be moved from the Roost and are seeking refuge further up in the mountains."

"This has gone far enough!" Thea fumed. "We must proclaim my return and end this!"

"Then I would suggest that we call for an armed escort," Galen cautioned. "Several brawls erupted during the night, resulting in more than a few deaths. At least one group has been eager to call for Dame Chrissie to be stripped of her titles and sent into exile."

“Some people still think that Raisah is holding back on signing Fitzwilliam’s budget due to my investiture,” I explained to Thea. “But it’s not my resignation she wants, it’s this growing chaos. I just don’t know how we’ll get help here in time.”

“For once, I am ahead of events,” Galen announced.

With the sweep of an arm, the Wizard indicated what he’d been working on prior to our arrival. A length of bright purple rope hung from a hole cut into the ceiling. Galen tugged on the rope, and a delicate two-tone chime pealed out from a hidden bell.

“That’s nice, I guess,” I said, perplexed. “But what–”

There was a knock at the door. The centaur opened it to reveal a pair of blue-clad pages.

“My lord?” one asked.

“This is unquestionably urgent,” Galen stated, in his deep bass voice. “The fate of the kingdom rests upon you two completing your tasks with alacrity.”

Both pages glanced uncertainly at him, then me.

“He’s not joking,” I added. “It really is.”

The one who spoke before straightened up proudly. “Command us, Wizard.”

Galen pointed to him. “I wish you to go to the Commander of the Palace Guard. Tell him that Dame Chrissie and the Court Wizard have located the Albess. Tell him that we need as many armed knights as he can spare to escort her from Dame Chrissie’s demesne to the throne room.” To the other, he added, “And I wish you to go to Parliament. Tell them that the Head of Parliament is alive and wishes to have them present at King Fitzwilliam’s court as she re-takes her rightful place among the Hoohan.”

The two pages set off at a run. I turned to Galen. “Maybe I’m being paranoid, but who else can we bring to this party? Can you transport back Shaw, or Liam?”

“I’ve been expending a great deal of power to complete the King’s project. I might be able to bring one of the two back, but this shall deplete my magic for the rest of the day.”

I considered the situation for a moment while Galen reached over

behind the slate board and retrieved his iron wizard's staff. The problem was, even if we drained Galen's talents to bring back one or the other, both Liam and Shaw would be near exhaustion from the hours spent on the run from the Noctua.

"I think we'll go this one alone," I concluded. "We'll no doubt need your spellcasting abilities, even if they're minimal."

"I am ever at your service, Dayna."

Something still nagged at me. I was sure that whatever Raisah was up to, she'd have an ace in the hole somewhere. The fact that the owls had used a dragon against Thea at one point still worried me. Nix had even thrown me a big clue, one that my brain hadn't figured out yet.

The pounding of an armored fist against the door broke any more thoughts I might have had on the matter. Galen pulled the door aside and Commander Yervan, clad in his gold-trimmed plate armor, joined us in the tower room. With him were three other fully armed and plate armored knights.

"I came as soon as I got your message. This better not be a false–" Yervan began testily. Then he spotted Thea upon her perch. He inhaled sharply, then bowed at the waist. "Albess, I see that Dame Chrissie and the Court Wizard speak true. Allow me to be your guide and your guard."

"It shall be my honor," Thea acknowledged, with a pleased 'hoo!'.

"Hold on!" I butted in. "Three men? That's all you brought?"

"It is all I have left," Yervan said resignedly. "Several sons-of-whelps left the Palace Guard yesterday when it appeared that we would no longer be paid. The others are spread throughout the palace, busy preventing fights or breaking them up. We lost six men last night when we caught a group of scoundrels attempting to tunnel into the basement, where they believed the King had a secret stash of gold coin."

"I recognize this trio of knights," Galen added, as he saw my concern grow. "They are among the best and bravest that Commander Yervan has to offer."

"All right, then," I said. I found that I had to wipe my hands on the side of my doublet to take off the sweat before I took my gun out

and held it at my side. “Commander, I would recommend having your men draw their weapons and precede the Albess to the throne room. I and the Albess will follow, and Galen shall bring up the rear. If the owls try anything, it will be an attack from above, before we get to the throne room.”

Yervan nodded. “Men, draw swords!”

The slithery sound of steel filled the room, followed by the jingle and creak of armor as the four men moved into position. Thea fluttered over to join me, and Galen followed the entire group out as we pushed through the tower doors and down the main hallway.

It was almost funny. The last time I’d come down these passageways under Yervan’s escort, I’d been on my way to becoming Dame Chrissie. I’d had butterflies in my stomach from worrying about how others would see me.

Now, I just hoped that we’d stay alive.

The halls were deserted. The torches burned as always, the smells of slate and soot firm in my nose. Only once did I glimpse the tiniest hint of movement in the shadowed rafters above. No movement, but the sounds were disturbing.

In the distance, I heard the clash of sword on sword, of men in battle, crying out in pain or rage. And as we drew up in the throne room’s antechamber, a new, ugly note crept in: the sounds of shouting and calls for order.

Yervan and his men looked to me. I wished that I had something better to tell them.

“There’s nothing left but to play this out,” I said firmly. “Let’s go in.”

The Commander of the Palace Guard strode up and threw open the doors.

We marched on through as a group. Instantly, the lords and knights at the tables around the throne stopped their arguments in mid-sentence. For a split second, I thought that this was a good sign. Maybe this *would* be as easy as Thea suspected.

Then I got a better look at the inside of the throne room.

One thought managed to make its way through my brain.

Oh, crap!

Then the doors swung shut behind us with a final, heart-stopping *boom*.

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Chapter Forty-One

I entered the now-familiar throne room in the company of four elite knights and a centaur wizard to back me up. The knights were armored, the wizard ready to cast spells, and I had a 9mm firearm to boot. But my guts still went cold at what I saw.

The rafters were *packed* with owls.

Around thirty brown-plumaged Parliamentarians shared perch space with an equal number of butterscotch-feathered Noctua. Below them, both Lord Behnaz and Lord Ivor were on their feet, apparently in the middle of angrily denouncing each other. The groups of remaining lords sat glowering at each other, while the knights in attendance stood with their hands dangerously close to their sword hilts.

King Fitzwilliam seemed to be the only one halfway happy to see me, though not so much for my presence, per se. Once again, at least I was bringing him something to break up the monotony.

Since the room had gone silent upon my rather dramatic entrance, I stepped between two of Commander Yervan's men and got to the heart of the matter.

"King Fitzwilliam!" I declared loudly. "I, Dame Chrissie, have braved dangers both dark and deep to return Albess Thea to where she belongs: to lead Andeluvia's Parliament!"

If I'd thought the room quiet before, now you could hear a pin drop. Then, there was a collective intake of breath as the King rose from his throne. The owls looked on, their impassive faces impossible to read. Xandra wasn't among the group, but Raisah and Nox were. The latter's eyes burned at me with raw vitriol.

"Dame Chrissie," Fitzwilliam announced. "Never have I welcomed more the return of a newly raised knight. Female or no, you have silenced those who wished you off this royal court. Albess, I pray that you are well enough to return to your post and your people?"

Thea fluttered up to hover in midair above us. Her voice was weaker and tinnier than mine or Fitzwilliam's, but I could make her

out just fine.

"I am ready, and as my first act as the Head of Parliament, I hereby release all funds requested from Andeluvia's owl-managed treasury."

A raucous cheer rang out from the assembled men and women of Fitzwilliam's court. Even most of the Parliamentarians let out joyful 'hoos!'. But the Noctua all remained stone-faced.

What the hell had Nix said to me about the throne room?

Raisah's voice rang out in the hall as the cheers died down. It was as cold and as implacable as ever, her words pelting down upon everyone like sleet.

"The Albess' words are in vain. She has no power to give or approve. She has not returned to lead the Noctua, let alone speak for all the Hoohan."

Thea remained in a hover just overhead, her feathers bristling in agitation. "The one I speak to is nothing but the leader of the Noctua, and a corrupted soul of an owl, at that! You have attempted my murder, imprisoning me where none could see. You sentenced me to die, and you murdered my successor in the nest! I declare your position null and void, Raisah!"

"And I repudiate your authority as well," Fitzwilliam added. "You have lied repeatedly under the Oath of Fealty between men and owls! If the Albess won't take you into custody for your crimes, then I certainly can and will!"

Raisah let out an angry *clack* with her beak. "One is left with no choice, then. One shall convene a new Parliament, and then dub a new set of men as nobles to deal with."

Goose pimples began rippling along my arms.

"Galen!" I hissed. "Get ready to grab Thea and get out of here!"

"What?" he whispered, startled. "But you will require–"

"If she is slain, we've lost everything!"

All around and overhead, the assembled lords, knights, and Parliamentarian owls nervously gazed at one another. Raisah's pronouncement had rattled them. Before Thea or anyone else could act, the self-proclaimed 'Anointed' spoke again.

“Remove the old Parliament,” Raisah stated calmly.

Nox raised his right wing. The remaining Noctua leapt from their perches with a trio of heavy wing beats, propelling their muscular bodies into the air. Each raised their right foot, tipped with razor-sharp battle talons.

“*What are you doing?*” Thea cried.

A sound like a side of beef being chopped by a steel hedge shear.

SNICKER-SNACK!

Fitzwilliam and the rest of the royal court watched, aghast, as each of the Noctua swiped their claws across their Parliamentary counterpart. Blood pattered down in a horrific drizzle followed by meaty *thunks* as parts of owls rained down. Heads. Wings. Bisected torsos.

A flurry of red-smeared feathers drifted by afterwards, almost as an afterthought.

“Galen!” I screamed.

The eight-foot tall centaur reached up and grabbed the Albess with one hand. She squawked in outrage, whether from the Wizard’s handling or the slaughter above, I wasn’t sure. Galen tucked Thea in the crook of his arm like a feathery football, pivoted on his hooves, and charged back out the doors. No sooner than he had left than Fitzwilliam found his voice, even while those around him still gaped at the carnage.

“Commander, close and guard the doors!” he ordered.

Yervan signaled to his men. Two quickly moved to shut the doors and stood ready. The sound of steel on leather echoed in the room as every knight drew his weapon. I looked around nervously. Yervan and his palace guards had both sword and shield. Most of the other knights present had only swords. Neither the King nor several of the Lords had any weapons at all.

“Come on!” Yervan urged me, and his remaining knight. “We stand with the King!”

I stayed between the two men as we drew closer to the foot of the throne. I didn’t take my eyes off the Noctua. Each of the remaining owls had returned to their perches, though their talons now dripped

with blood and gore from their fellow Hoohan. Nox still fixed his hateful glare upon me. Raisah had folded her wings together and appeared to be speaking quietly to herself.

"Sir Quinton," Yervan ordered, "I must guard our liege. I charge you with protecting Dame Chrissie with your life."

Quinton simply nodded. The big knight moved to stand before me in a half-crouch. He held his sword out and his shield just high enough for him to see over.

"Traitor! Oath breaker! Slaughterer of your own kin!" Fitzwilliam shouted, the cords of his neck standing out red with rage. "Your lives are forfeit!"

Raisah shifted her wings back to their normal position. Her voice continued as reasonable as if she and Fitzwilliam were discussing the weather.

"You must reach us first."

"That can be arranged." Fitzwilliam snapped his finger, and another of the palace guardsmen stepped to his side. "Bring a battalion of men with pikes and crossbows back here immediately."

"It matters not," Raisah said, with an avian shrug. "You and your court shall soon be dead. And since we Noctua control access to all your realm's gold, we shall select a new set of men who shall listen and obey our wishes. As it has always been, in the time of your forefathers, and the forefathers before them."

Fitzwilliam scowled at that. The knight he had given orders to jogged across the expanse of the throne room, his sword held point up, eyes scanning all about. He almost got as far as the doors to the antechamber.

Just as he turned to leave, one of the Noctua dove at him from the closest rafter. The assembled court called out in horror. But it was far too late.

It took just the blink of an eye. A blur of yellow swooped down upon him.

Snicker-snack!

The Noctua's strike took the knight's head off as cleanly as a guillotine. Blood fountained from the neck stump, and the body fell

with a thud before the doors. The two knights that Yervan had posted by the doors went into a crouch, their eyes wide and staring in horror.

The severed head rolled across the floor and ended up facing Fitzwilliam's throne. A startled look remained upon the decapitated man's face. Several of the lords recoiled with a curse or a gasp.

I considered. I alone in the throne room could reach the owls with my weapon. Each of my two magazines held fifteen rounds. In theory, I had enough to handle the Noctua.

But theory crumbled in the face of my experience. I'd taken my time to line up each shot when I'd killed Nix. That owl had been panicked and completely blind, and I'd still needed three rounds just to bring him down. I wasn't about to bet my life on that theory holding up. But at least I could take out Raisah and Nox. I raised my gun towards the rafters and lined up my shot as best as I was able.

Nox let out a squawk of warning as I squeezed the trigger three times.

The three bullets buzzed through empty air as the owls took off. I did my best to track them, but the rest of the Noctua went into motion as a butterscotch-colored swarm, hiding my initial target. I squeezed twice more, both bullets whining into the darkness with no effect.

Sir Quinton winced as the gun's report went off close to his head, but he didn't leave his spot between me and the owls. The other lords and several of the knights stared at me in amazement, though the King simply looked annoyed. I'd forgotten that most of the men at court hadn't participated in the attack on the Old Man of the Mountain so hadn't seen me use my weapon before.

From inside the orbiting mass of owls, Raisah or Nox let out a series of squawks. A half-dozen of the Noctua peeled away from the flock and dove at me. To his credit, Sir Quinton stood his ground and more. With a flick of his sword, he slashed the lead bird out of the air.

I aimed a little higher to make sure I didn't hit my armored defender, then squeezed the trigger twice more. Another of the Noctua fell, rolling across the floor cradling a broken wing. Sir Ivor stepped forward and skewered it with his own weapon, ending the thing's cries.

The remaining four raptors changed their target from me to Sir Quinton. Two slashed at his raised sword arm. Their talons clanged off his plate armor, scoring and denting the metal. The other two went for his head, a *snack!* ringing out as a pair of slashes hit home. Quinton was driven back a step by the impact. He dropped his sword and shield as he fell to one side. A mass of liquid red and wrinkled gray tissue tumbled from his head as his skullcap came loose and skidded across the flagstones.

Fitzwilliam darted in front of me, snatching up the fallen knight's sword and shield. Yervan cried out in alarm. I squeezed the trigger several more times as I spotted owls preparing to swoop down onto the King. I was rewarded with a cry of pain from one of the owls, but none fell from the air.

Under my cover, Fitzwilliam slipped an arm into the shield's straps and stepped back towards the relative shelter of the throne. Yervan moved forward, trying to guard both me and his monarch, calling to his remaining men. The two knights by the door kept their backs to the walls and began slide-walking their way towards us the exact same way I'd explored the Noctua's sepulcher.

"It seems we are caught in a stalemate," Fitzwilliam said. "The owls do not seem to be able to overwhelm us, or they would have attacked by now in force. Yet I gather that your weapon is not enough to turn the tide on its own."

"I think not, your Majesty," I acknowledged.

"Perhaps it is enough. The noise this battle has made shall surely summon more of the Palace Guard. Once they ascertain the situation, they shall bring distance weapons to bear."

"Agreed," Yervan said. "We only need hold out another couple of minutes, Sire."

"Then we shall do so." Fitzwilliam shook his fist at the owls angrily. "For Andeluvia's sake, we shall!"

In that moment, the man looked undeniably kingly. Fitzwilliam's blond hair shone like a halo as the morning sun came out, pouring sunshine through the window above his throne.

Suddenly, Nix's words popped into my head, crystal clear.

Why did you use a dragon? I had asked.

His reply: *One does not indulge prey. Especially when the answer lies directly over one's head every day at court.*

I risked a glance up at the window. There was the same stained glass depiction of a roaring dragon that I'd seen before, when Vazura had unleashed them on me and Galen the first time I'd come to Andeluvia. That bit of treachery resulted in Fitzwilliam pulling all the dragons back to the Eastern Reach.

All?

No, not *all* of the dragons. Galen had said that Fitzwilliam kept a lance of dragons at the palace's Southern Keep.

Suddenly, my brain made the connections, and with a *click* I figured out what the owls had done. What Raisah was waiting for.

The Noctua must have control over at least one of the royal dragons. When they'd unleashed the reptile on Thea, the owls had to cover up the traces and blame a wyvern attack. Wyverns were wild, so no one would be able to pin the blame on any single creature. If the Noctua had left evidence of a dragon attack it might have pointed a finger back at the few creatures left in this part of Andeluvia.

And that meant…

A shadow blotted out the sunshine from above. A *big* shadow.

"Sire!" I called out.

Fitzwilliam stared at me, uncomprehending.

The window above shattered into a million pieces as a scaly, horned head smashed its way through into the throne room with a *roar*.

I leapt at the King, tackling the monarch I'd sworn an oath to protect.

If we survived this, I hoped that he wouldn't hold a grudge.

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Chapter Forty-Two

King Fitzwilliam outweighed me, but I had momentum on my side. More importantly, I had desperation on my side. He folded with a grunt as I hit him in the stomach. We rolled together, coming to rest against the table to the left of the throne.

A pane of glass fell from overhead and slammed into the top of that same throne. It wedged itself fast as it nearly bisected the piece of furniture. Then the dragon swept both glass and throne away as the creature bulled its way through the roof and hauled its bulk into the room.

The damned thing wasn't locomotive-sized, like Sirrahon. But it was a heck of a lot bigger than the Piper Cub-sized pair that Galen and I had fought before. This creature was stockier, as if it had decided to go bulk up before crashing the royal party, and its scales were the shiny black of a licorice wheel.

The dragon let out an ear-splitting roar and thrashed its tail. In its fury, it flipped over the heavy wooden table seating the lords of the Western Reach. Men went flying through the air to land in crumpled heaps. An ebony-colored head swung in my direction as Fitzwilliam and I struggled to get up. Jet-black teeth jutted from a scaly mouth as the beast oriented on us.

Yervan's two knights finally rejoined their commander. With a cry, they leaped into battle, hacking and slashing at the dragon's flank. Their swords bounced off harmlessly. Yervan barked out more orders. Together the three men drove the points of their swords home like spears.

Blood the color of rancid pomegranate juice gushed out as if under pressure from the wounds. The dragon raised its head in a *snarl*. Half-turning, it swept its forepaw like a steel-tipped scythe. One of Yervan's men screamed as he was cut to pieces by the giant claws.

The Noctua chose that moment to swoop down from the rafters. Nox led a squadron of raptors as they dove. With a *snick*, his talons closed on the upraised arm of Yervan's remaining knight. The blow

found a chink in the man's armor. Human blood mixed with dragon fluids as Nox cleaved the man's arm away at the elbow. The knight stared at the scarlet liquid that fountained from the stump, then fell over in shock. The smells of sulfur and iron mixed in the air, creating a soul-crushing stench.

Other talons tore at Yervan. Two of the owls grabbed hold of his sword with their armored talons and tried to yank it free. Others dove at his head. Still more slashed at his arms. Yervan felt to his knees, doing his best to beat back the attackers. He swung his shield arm down, pinning and crushing one of the Noctua against the floor.

A cry finally went up from the assembled lords and knights scattered around the room.

Lord Ivor and his son charged across the room and into the fray. They were followed by the remaining men from the Eastern Reach. Lord Behnaz only hesitated a second before shouting 'Have at them!' and threw his men into the fight as well.

Four more of the Noctua went down as knights and lords lopped off wings or hacked at the raptors' legs. Then two more knights and lords fell headless or armless as the owls rallied, striking whenever the knights let their guards down or tried to fight the dragon. The rest of the owls swooped in, slashing open unprotected flesh or rending armor. They pressed the men into a defensive position back against the upended table.

For his part, the dragon ignored his wounds and the battle raging beside it. The creature oriented relentlessly on the King. Fitzwilliam got to his feet and stood his ground before the thing, clanging his sword against the rim of his shield. Me, I got my legs untangled and scrambled out of the way as quickly as I could.

The dragon's neck shot forward in a convulsive *snap*. Fitzwilliam held up his shield and the dragon's jaws closed around it. A *squeal* came from bending metal as the reptile began to compress his jaws.

One of the Noctua broke off from the larger of the two fights. It banked around to come at Fitzwilliam's blind side. I squeezed the trigger until my weapon ran dry. The owl let out a keening scream and then cartwheeled into the fire smoldering in the room's hearth.

The gag-worthy smell of burnt feathers joined that of blood and sulfur.

The King tried to tug his arm free from the shield's leather straps, but he was held fast. The dragon tossed his head back and forth, shaking Fitzwilliam the way a dog would worry at a particularly meaty bone. Fitzwilliam hacked at the beast's snout, but his blows had no effect.

Time slowed to a crawl as I ejected the spent magazine, pulled out my last remaining one, and slammed it home. Now the other Noctua saw that the King was in trouble. Raisah and Nox rose from where they had been trading blows with Fitzwilliam's knights. They rallied several of their remaining warriors and beat their wings furiously to gain the altitude they needed to strike.

At that moment, the dragon stopped shaking his head. He made an ungracious sound. A sound like a *belch*. My insides contracted in fear as I realized what was going to happen next.

"Sire!" I screamed. "Hack at your straps, not the dragon!"

Comprehending my meaning, the King angled his sword to slice at the straps that held his arm fast to the shield. The Noctua ascended to the height of the rafters and then arrowed their way down towards the stricken monarch. A triumphant battle-cry came from their beaks as Fitzwilliam's arm fell free from his shield. The King landed on his knees, stunned and completely vulnerable.

I could have aimed at the Noctua. I probably could have scored a hit or two.

But I wanted to take all of them out.

So I aimed at the one part of the dragon that I knew from experience was vulnerable to a well-placed bullet. I squeezed the trigger as I pointed the barrel right at the reptile's eye.

At this close range, my bullets punched through the protective clear scale. A gout of greenish goo erupted from the impact point. I kept firing, scoring hits against the side of the thing's head, another to the eye, two more to the lower jaw. Most of my shots bounced off, but all of them hurt.

The dragon let go of Fitzwilliam's shield. Then it swung its head away from the source of its pain and towards the oncoming Noctua.

Blindly, the creature let out a jet of fire that could have come from a fighter jet's afterburners.

The owls flew right into the flames.

Heedless of the raptors' shrieks, the reptile thrashed one more time. It let out a blood-curdling moan, and then the light went out in its remaining eye. The dragon lurched forward a couple of steps and then collapsed, pinning Fitzwilliam's legs under the massive bulk of its neck.

I dove aside as the horned, bloody head came down with a *boom*. The creature's armored skull smashed the Eastern Reach's table to kindling. Pain flared anew in my head as I was tossed against one of the throne room's stone pillars.

I fought my way to my feet as I felt my head spin. The fight went on against the owls, and many armored or robed bodies now lay across the floor. Yet it looked like the men were finally gaining the upper hand.

Several greasy fires now dotted the open space in the middle of the room. I realized that they were the remains of the Noctua that had charged us. I stumbled my way past the dragon's body to reach the King. Fitzwilliam had gotten one of his legs free, but his other remained stuck at the ankle. He looked up in alarm as he spotted me.

"'Ware, Dame Chrissie!" he shouted. "Look to your right!"

A grayish-yellow club came at me from the side and took me in the gut. The wind whistled out of my lungs with a hiss. My gun went flying. I felt one of my ribs *creak* as it bent, just short of the breaking point.

The hit spun me around so that I fell to my knees against the wreck of the table. Dazed and weaponless, I waited for the final blow to end my life.

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Chapter Forty-Three

Raisah half-walked, half-dragged her way towards me. One of her wings had been so badly broken that it looked as if it had been dislocated. She held the other up like a cudgel, ready to smash me with it again.

Her head was a fright of frayed, singed feathers. The mask around her face was gray with soot. Her blood-smeared battle talons still gleamed as they scraped with eager anticipation against the floor.

"One wonders what you will do now," Raisah said with deadly earnestness. "Now that you are weaponless. You are as helpless as a newborn chick."

I fought to force air back into my lungs. I scrabbled around, my hands fumbling for purchase. Then they closed around the one thing I needed more than anything in the world at that moment in time.

I turned back to Raisah and grinned.

"Even newborn chicks know how to fight," I gritted out. "At least if they've been trained by a griffin."

Raisah frowned, not understanding. She raised up to her full height and brought her wing down to bash my skull in. I waited until the right moment. The moment that Hollyhock had taught me to wait for.

My hands had closed around one of the broken table's legs. Now, the heavy wood made a perfect club. I brought it around to parry Raisah's blow.

Her muscular wing smacked into the wood. The impact almost knocked the weapon out of my hand, but Raisah howled in pain and danced back a step. That was all the opening I needed. Leaping to my feet I swung my club at her with all my might. My blow connected with her head, sending the Noctua leader sprawling on her back. She tried to lever herself back up, but I brought a second blow down. Her remaining wing gave way with a *snap*.

"That is enough, Dame Chrissie," Fitzwilliam said, as he stumbled up next to me. "The day is ours."

The King limped, and he did that half-barefoot. A quick glance confirmed that Fitzwilliam had left one of his shoes pinned under the dragon's neck. But he'd also retrieved his sword. He held the point of his weapon against Raisah's singed neck feathers. The owl gasped and lay still.

"I do not expect you to yield," Fitzwilliam grated. "But unless you want my steel in your throat, I expect you to remain still."

I looked around and saw that the lords and knights on the royal court had taken care of the remaining Noctua. But there was no sense of victory, no sense of celebration. There were an awful lot of bodies, both owl and human, that lay strewn across the floor.

Commander Yervan nodded at me as he passed by to join his liege. Blood ran from cuts to his arms and face, but none of the wounds seemed critical. Fitzwilliam charged him with watching the fallen Raisah. Then the King walked back to the spot that had held his throne. He still looking surprisingly regal despite his limp and his missing shoe.

"Lord Ivor!" he bellowed. "Lord Behnaz! Step forth!"

The two lords, both of whom looked battered but whole, did as they were told. Their expressions were a mix of shell-shocked amazement and weariness.

"What we have survived was not just an attack," Fitzwilliam began. "It was the first salvo in an old war which has arisen from the ages past. Dame Chrissie has been fighting this war for us outside of our kingdom. But now it has spread here. We can doubt no more. What say you?"

"I no longer doubt, my liege," Behnaz said humbly.

Ivor nodded. "It is as you say, Sire."

"We have been attacked from without," he glanced to where Raisah lay still, then at the stinking dragon corpse. "And we have been attacked from within. Do either of you believe that we can stay huddled in our castles, count our coins, and dream we are at peace?"

"No longer, your Majesty." Ivor said.

"Truly, Sire, war is upon us." Behnaz agreed.

"Then attend me, now!" Fitzwilliam ordered. The King held his

sword forth, pointing it towards the step immediately below him. The two lords knelt on that step, and Fitzwilliam's voice thundered through the silence. "Renew your vows to your king, your country, your people, your homes! If thou must place thy fortune, thy demesnes, or thy body in harm's way to protect thy lord or to prosecute his cause in war or peace, thou must do so dutifully and without hesitation. Swear it now!"

"I so swear!" the two men cried.

"*Then I dub thee loyal lords of the realm!*" Fitzwilliam thundered. With that, he bestowed a pair of taps on their shoulders with his sword. Much gentler taps than I had gotten during my own investiture, I noted.

Now a cheer went up from the remaining men, no matter if they were wounded or not. I joined in myself, applauding as the King raised both men to their feet.

The doors to the antechamber flew open with a *bang*. Galen galloped in, armored from the torso up in chain mail and holding his wizard's staff high. A dozen soldiers armed with crossbows followed in his wake, though they came to a halt as they realized that the battle had already been decided. Galen pulled up in front of the King and inclined his head in respect.

"Sire, I see that you have things well in hand," Galen said, as he surveyed the carnage.

"Only thanks to Dame Chrissie's well-timed intervention," Fitzwilliam acknowledged. "Attend to my men as best you can, Wizard. Save those that you can, I beg of you. I shall send for my surgeons as well."

Galen glanced at me, a worried look on his face. I waved him off to help those in much more need of help than myself. My head hurt, and my torso both ached and burned where Raisah had clouted me. But I'd take care of that when I returned home. Instead, I went to find my gun. It was bad enough that there was a still-loaded firearm lost somewhere outside the Sepulcher of the Eight Talons. I didn't want to leave another one lying around the ruins of Fitzwilliam's court.

I found my gun where it had slid up against a pile of rubble. And I

found something else nearby. A mass of burnt feather. Wisps of smoke rose from the pitiful-looking pile. But I spotted the steady movement of labored breathing.

I brought the Glock up and sighted carefully on the mass. I walked over carefully, wary of a hundred dirty tricks, but nothing sprang at me. I looked down on the ruin of a raptor that had been called 'Nox' only a minute ago.

The Noctua had been bathed in fire from his breastbone on down. Charred stubs of feather projected from crisped, cracked skin. Sticky clear fluid ran from the cracks. His talons lay shriveled and black inside their metal armor casings. But Nox's eyes focused on me as I stood over him.

"She-from-another-world has prevailed," he rasped. "This one had summoned the dragon to Sir Talish's land so that the Albess would breathe no more. This one should have ignored Raisah's wishes and let the beast continue till its task was complete."

I hadn't expected this. It was a deathbed confession of sorts. "So you summoned the dragon to kill Thea, but Raisah didn't want that? Why not?"

A cough. "The stupidity of the Anointed. Raisah wished the death of the Albess and the owlet to succeed the Albess to be clean. Natural. Hah! The holy ones forget. This one knows that death is always messy. Like the owlet's."

The words gripped my heart in a vise. "What do you mean, 'like the owlet's'?"

"Time was running short. The little mad one could have lingered for months, no matter how much poison we slipped into his feed and medicine." Another cough, followed by a horrible, insane chuckle that bubbled up from Nox's throat. "This one waited until parents and healers were gone. There was no need for battle talons. Merely the weight of this one's foot on the little one's chest. Until the air and life were crushed out for good."

The same red-black darkness that I'd seen when Holly had died descended upon me again. Only this time, it was different. This time, it was fueled by different things than pity or horror.

When I'd learned how willing the fayleene were to sacrifice Liam's life, a small part of me had wanted to put the Lead Does down for good. When I'd learned what the Council of Elders had done to Holly, a bigger part of me had wanted to put a gun to Belladonna's head and end her life.

What Nox had done disgusted me. It brought me to a low place that I never thought existed within myself. He had snuffed out a life that had been so poor, so abandoned and alone, that Perrin hadn't known anyone like him even existed until I'd shown up. And then Nox done the final deed in his own way…because Perrin was simply being *inconvenient*.

I pressed the barrel of my gun against the O-shaped black splotch of feathers beside the owl's eye. Nox squirmed as he felt the still-hot metal against his face. The owl's beak clacked weakly as he did so.

"Killing this one will do you no good," he wheezed. "It shall not bring back your owlet."

"No," I whispered. "It won't. But it might make me feel better."

I squeezed the trigger, once. With a *bang*, Nox went still. Dark fluid began to pool under the remains of the raptor's head.

A *clop-clop* of hooves as Galen came to stand next to me. Quietly, he said, "Nox was critically injured. I don't believe that he would have lasted another quarter hour."

"Maybe," I said flatly. "Then again, maybe I just felt that 'time was running short'."

Galen looked pained at that. "We might have been able to ask him questions in the time he was still alive."

I tossed my head over to where Yervan stood over Raisah. "That one's still alive. You can talk to her. I'm done with Andeluvia for today."

Gun in hand, I made my way towards the doors. The red rage faded, and my eyes went as cold as burnt-out cinders. As I walked, I passed several of the knights that had fought in the battle.

Two of them bowed to me.

All of them stepped back out of my way as I left.

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Chapter Forty-Four

The buttery smell of pastry greeted like an old friend when I returned to the Parliament building.

It had been two days since the fight in Fitzwilliam's throne room. A long bruise had blossomed on my right side. The shape of the contusion made it look like I'd been beaten with a police baton. At least it didn't hurt to breathe anymore. I'd called in sick for the rest of the week, religiously popped my pain medication, and generally tried not to move too much.

I still didn't feel up to scratch yet, but I needed to talk with Albess Thea, and my brain wouldn't let me rest until I did. Xandra greeted me happily, though her joy was tempered with sadness. Her son had been lost, along with a great number of her friends in both Parliament and the ranks of the Noctua.

I wasn't all that sympathetic about the Noctua. But there were a painfully large number of empty perches in Parliament proper. Thea hardly had to raise her voice to ask for privacy. Xandra and the remaining owls took to the air and exited at the top of the cavernous room. That left me alone with the Albess, and her vast buffet table of freshly baked pies, pots of tea, and steaming tureens of mouse-based dishes.

Thea had been enjoying one of her meals as I entered. The Albess still looked underweight, but she had a vitality that matched or surpassed anything I'd seen from her before. She set aside her spoon as I took a seat in front of her.

"Yet more congratulations for Dame Chrissie are in order," Thea remarked. "The triumph in the throne room belongs to you."

"The only congratulations I deserve are for surviving," I said, as my side gave me a twinge, reminding me who was really in charge.

"I have questioned several others about what took place besides Raisah. Fitzwilliam, among other people, is more grateful than you know."

I waved it off. "I suppose that I saved his life. But he saved mine

in turn. There's no debt of honor or anything like that between us."

"You misunderstand," Thea stated primly. "He is grateful for the circumstances that you brought into play. This event has allowed him to demonstrate his physical bravery and leadership to all."

"Even with the loss of many men and several of his lords?"

"Even so. The carnage that took place before his throne proved once and for all that the lords who do not heed the royal summons shall fall in battle or war. Lord Behnaz and Lord Ivor still dislike each other, and you. But they cannot and shall not go back on a renewed oath of loyalty performed in public, in the heat of battle, and of their own free will."

I considered that. Fitzwilliam had seen how a common enemy could be the one thing that could topple his realm. Or unite it and bind it together like no other cause could.

"I also wish to congratulate you on the selection of your new sigil," Thea continued. "Alas, I am not the Lord Pursuivant. Could you explain its significance to me?"

I carefully pulled back my cloak to expose my doublet. A new shield pattern had been embroidered into the fabric, and would soon adorn my ceremonial armor, the entryway to my demesne, even my rugs, curtains, and bedsheets, if I wished. The quartered field sported rich shades of burgundy, bright gold, dark green, and black.

"The colors represent each of the realms that has brought me this far in Andeluvia," I explained. In order, I pointed at the quarters. "Burgundy for the centaurs. Gold for the griffins. A forest green for the fayleene. And black for the pooka."

"Interesting. And what of the symbol at the center? It looks like a tower."

"It's my demesne, the only one like it in all of Andeluvia. And as the 'Dame of the Tower', I asked for one final detail." I pointed towards the top of the picture. The tower image had an open square for a window in the center, but just below the battlements were a series of small dots. "Those are openings like the ones your people use atop the Parliament building. That's to recognize that the Hoohan also played a big part in where I am today."

Thea danced back and forth for a moment, letting out a couple of pleased ‘hoos!’. “So much joy I take in that. We owls are respected, but rarely welcomed or acknowledged within man’s realm.”

“I’m not surprised. No one venerates their tax man.” I leaned forward carefully, and took a more serious tone. “But I have some questions of my own that I’d like answered. To begin with, did we learn anything from Raisah?”

“Not as much as you would wish,” Thea said. Her reply was surprisingly cautious. As if she were still weighing what she could tell me. “Raisah had been planning the rebellion of the Noctua for some time. Moving people like Nix and Nox into positions of power, making sure the rest of our religious caste followed her lead. She would have moved to usurp Perrin as soon as I had passed on.”

“Then why the change in plan? Why go through the cover-up, the poisonings, the fighting–”

“Because the Old War is upon us now. Because powers that begin and end beyond my sight are stirring again. Raisah spoke of a shadow in the shape of a man.”

That sent a chill through my veins. “A shadow?”

“I do not believe she meant that literally. Rather, she could have meant ‘a man in the shadows’. Or a creature that was not a man, but wished to look like one.”

I thought of Holly’s mysterious ‘him’. Of the shapeless demons of the rocks and air, like the Old Man of the Mountain. I suppressed a shiver.

“This being was most interested in me. And you, for that matter.” Thea said. “A choice had to be made: Which to strike at first? The ‘shadow’ suggested that you were the bigger threat, that you had forced their hand. But Raisah insisted that they had to move against me, since I held power over the Hoohan.”

“Me? But why…I mean, what else did Raisah say?”

“She knew no more, so she could say no more.”

“What happened to her?”

“She serves some other purpose now.” The Albess motioned to the plate beside me. “I find that I am now in the mood for a meat pie.

Would you please move the platter closer to me?"

I picked up the plate, which was piled high with clamshell-shaped pastries that looked to me like oversized turnovers. A heavenly scent of buttery crust and savory meat curled up from them into my nose, making my mouth water.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," I admitted, "But I want to try one of those."

"You are welcome to," Thea offered. Her expression had taken on a strange inscrutability. "I must warn you. This dish may not be to a human's liking."

Well, I wasn't one to pass up a challenge. I picked up one of the pastries and took a cautious bite. The texture of the meat-and-vegetable filling was velvety and bursting with flavor. I restrained myself from a second bite with difficulty.

"This is amazingly good," I enthused. "Especially for mouse pie. I don't mean to be rude, Albess, but mouse just isn't at the top of most non-owl cuisines."

Thea made a series of short 'hoo-hoo' sounds that I recognized as an owl belly laugh. "It is not mouse, Dayna."

"Oh? What is it, then?"

"Fowl."

A terrible suspicion blossomed in my mind. "What kind of fowl?"

The Albess' warm eyes took on the sheen of steel as she answered.

"The kind that is best served *cold*."

The buttery taste curdled on my tongue. My stomach did a little sideways shimmy and I placed the rest of the meat pie down on the plate. Then I pushed the plate as far away from me as possible.

"As I said," Thea reminded me, "This dish may not be to a human's liking."

I nodded and reached for the tea pot. Thea went on as I poured myself a steaming cup and then proceeded to sip it as quickly as possible to scour my tongue clean.

"There are only a few details I wish you to know for now. Though many of the Noctua were slain in battle, yet more were stationed from the sepulcher to the southern sea. They have scattered with the wind,

and shall not pose a threat for a while yet. The fayleene princeling known as 'Wyeth' has also vanished, for the only Noctua who knew of his comings and goings are now dead."

I finally found my voice. "What else can you tell me about the Old War, Albess?"

Thea's beak shut with a *snap*. She hung her head as she spoke again.

"I shall tell you what little I know in time. But not today. Leave an old hen her pride for now. For what I know is shameful, for both me and the Hoohan. I cannot face it, not yet, not after all I have been through."

I had to catch myself before I clenched my fists in frustration. This wasn't Raisah, someone who I felt no problem pushing back against. I dearly wanted to count Thea as my friend, and didn't want to lose her good feelings towards me. But I wanted desperately to know at least one or two other things, so I tried once more.

"Albess, there is a reason I gambled everything on bringing you back," I began humbly. "When I discussed the situation with my friends, I realized that you were responsible for so many events that have taken place. That you were what I thought of as the 'Hand of Light' moving in counter to the darkness. Was I wrong in that? Did you just do everything by chance? Was bringing me to your world just random chance?"

"A 'hand of light', am I?" Thea asked, but her expression was pleased. She flexed a set of talons. "More of a 'foot' of light, I would say. But yes, I have been trying to put pieces into play for many years now. To serve or counter prophecy, as it may be. And that is where you came in, Dayna."

My mind was awhirl with the possibility, but I clamped down on the thought. "I don't believe in fate, or prophecy, Albess. I'm a twenty-first century woman, at least where I come from. And it's in my nature to fight anything that is 'just not to be', whether with a well-placed hunch or a forensics lab."

"And how has that worked out for you?"

That deflated me. "Not well. I tried and failed to get ahead of

Belladonna's pronouncements. I suppose that you'll tell me that I never stood a chance."

"Xandra told me of your efforts. I was going to congratulate you on how well you did. You were right, the owls were moving on silent wings, ready to strike, even as they imprisoned me."

Thea had a point, I realized. *I had called that prediction correctly. Only Raisah's perjury in front of Fitzwilliam's royal court had thrown me off.*

"I will share one last thing with you today," Thea said gently. "Your coming here was not by chance. You were selected because I saw through Galen's summoning spellcraft that you are a Hero."

I clearly heard the capital 'H' in Thea's voice.

I shook my head. "You must be joking! I'm a crime scene investigator, not some hunky warrior type. I don't see how–"

"That is because how men describe a Hero is different from the way we Hoohan do," Thea said, smoothly cutting off my objection. "I said that I have been putting pieces into play to serve prophecy."

"Or counter it."

"Even so. That is exactly where you come in."

"I don't understand. I'm destined to counter some prophecy?"

Another 'hoo' of amusement. "No, you are not. You hail from beyond this world, your roots are not here. You show up nowhere in any prophecy. *That* is what makes you a Hero. To the Hoohan, a Hero is one who can stand up to fate. Who can smash it to pieces, or jam it so that it progresses no further."

I finished sipping my tea as I thought about that. "Are you saying that I'm a kind of 'wild card' that allows you to reshuffle the deck?"

"From what I understand of human card games, that is a fair analogy." Thea pointed at me with her wing. "You have strength and intellect, that is true. But you bring unexpected qualities to bear. Your method of approaching problems is something no creature from this world can anticipate. And you have a sense of compassion, to assist others who cannot do so themselves. That trait is perhaps the rarest, as well as the most valuable."

I remembered Perrin's first greeting to me. *You must be the kindly*

monster that my parents keep talking about.

By helping Thea, I had found friends that had helped me through my darkest hours. And by assisting others to heal, I had healed and grown myself.

I considered it. Was that a good enough moral, one that could inspire a Hero?

Maybe.

It was certainly inspiring enough for me.

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Chapter Forty-Five

I sat on my back porch, looking up at the ridges of Griffith Park. The land sloped up steeply beyond my yard, turning into a tangle of trees and underbrush until the ridges culminated in the Art Deco dome of Griffith Observatory. It was a pretty view, and sheltered from most of L.A.'s incessant traffic noise. It gave me space to think.

Albess Thea's words from the other day still rang in my mind. I wasn't at all sure that she was right. I sure as heck didn't feel like a Hero. I wasn't even sure that it was possible to fight fate. Perhaps it was all an illusion, to give us the feeling of control when we had none.

My brain conjured up the image of a person jabbing at an elevator button, willing to car to arrive faster.

Thea had said I was right about the owls moving on silent wings, ready to strike, even as they imprisoned her. I had thought I'd successfully thwarted prophecy by nipping Raisah's coup in the bud. Now? I wasn't so sure. It occurred to me that there was another way to read things.

Belladonna's words never said *which* owls were moving, ready to strike. Xandra had even said something to that effect when she'd marshalled the forces of the Roost to back my play. Which meant that I hadn't *thwarted* prophecy. My actions had *fulfilled* it.

I let out a frustrated curse and put the idea aside. Too much thinking along these lines started making my head ache. And I knew what bothered me about the whole mess, when it came right down to it.

It was just in my character. After all, I was a forensics examiner. If something didn't add up on the slab, I worked at it until two and two darn well made four. Chemistry, physics and biology didn't leave things to fate, chance, karma, or any other form of metaphysical weirdness.

And something else had been bothering me. Something I needed to talk about face-to-face with a specific person.

I went back into the house and checked the time. The minute

hand had come around the hour mark again, so I knew Esteban would be home. Hopping in the car I headed out into traffic. I didn't shut the engine off until I'd parked in front of his place.

Esteban lived in one-half of a California bungalow-style duplex that someone had painted the color of ripe Granny Smith apples. I spotted his Barracuda in the driveway, so I made my way to the door and rang the bell.

Footsteps sounded inside, pausing as someone looked through the eyehole of the viewer. The rattle of a chain, and the door opened.

"Dayna!" Esteban exclaimed. He had been off his uniform and was wearing a white T-shirt. "Is everything all right?"

"Sort of," I said, jamming my thumbs into the top of my jean's pockets. "I'm sorry I didn't call. I can come back some other time if you're busy."

"No, I just got off shift." He opened the door and ushered me inside. "Of course, you knew that."

"Yeah, I did," I admitted, while trying to figure out where I could possibly begin. The rum-and-tea based scent of his cologne mixed with his sweat had already started tap dancing on my senses, but I tamped that down for now. "I kind of wanted to follow up on what happened after our last date."

He gave me a puzzled look as he led the way into his living room and settled into his side of the sofa. I gladly followed suit. Unlike the furniture in my own living room, Esteban's sofa hadn't suffered the abuse of a full-sized griffin, so I could sit in it without getting a kinked spring jabbing into my butt.

"You heard that Shelly's coming back," I said. Actually, I knew that he knew, I just didn't know where else to start.

"Yeah, I heard. At least, as soon as she's done with her psych evaluation. I hope she passes."

"She will. That magical affliction of hers…it's been healed."

He sat up. "What? When did this happen?"

I began telling him about Albess Thea. The story popped a cork on everything else that had happened in Andeluvia over the past two weeks and I found myself fighting back tears as I explained to him

about my becoming a Dame. I told him about the arrival of the Noctua. Xandra's plea for help. My meeting with little Perrin. Breaking the Albess out of the Sepulcher of the Eight Talons. Having Shelly learn about Andeluvia. Finding out that Thea and Shelly had healed each other. The gory battle in Fitzwilliam's throne room.

Then, I told him about how I'd finished off Nox.

"I did something terrible," I said, and to my ears I sounded like a little girl who'd been caught getting into the cookie jar. "I've killed before. I've always felt that I didn't really have a choice, not if I wanted to save my life, or a friend's life. But this was different. It wasn't in cold blood, I can tell you that. But it somehow…"

Esteban put a hand on my shoulder, making sure I was looking at him. "There was a difference, Dayna. You executed him. And we're not supposed to do that. We've all been taught that it's wrong to play God. Or judge and jury."

"Maybe that's part of it. The thing is, I don't think I'm feeling what I'm supposed to."

He was quiet for a second. "What are you feeling, then?"

"I'm not feeling regret. Not for killing that monster in owl form, I mean. That's what you're supposed to feel, right?"

"Some people say that."

"The only thing I feel is…" My emotions swirled around as if in a giant mixing vat, until I finally settled on the dominant one. "I feel uneasy. Worried. Like I just shuffled my feet while crossing a white chalk line."

"The line would still be there, Dayna."

"Yes, but it would be blurred now. And I know that, if I cross it again, it'll be easier. And the next time, and the next…"

He sighed. "You worry about what you might become. What you might end up seeing when you look in the mirror one morning."

Esteban's eyes were the ones shining now. I leaned into him, felt the hard solidity of his shoulder, the warmth of his body.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Back when I first became a patrolman, I worked the local streets around here. Kind of like how Vega started. The LAPD needed people

who knew the language, knew the area." His face took on a faraway look as he continued. "There was this dealer that worked San Pico Boulevard. He sold *hielo*, an amped-up version of methamphetamine. And to add the cherry on top of this mess, he sold to school kids as well as junkies."

I made a disgusted sound. Esteban nodded wearily.

"The hielo dealer, he wasn't part of my case load. Too far up the food chain for a rookie cop like me, they said. Until kids started turning up dead, OD'ed on the high-yield meth. One of them was a little girl with pigtails and a smile that could warm you up on a cold day. Her name was Amalia, and she was my cousin."

"So you tracked him down."

"That would have gotten me fired in two seconds," Esteban pointed out. "I didn't track the dealer down. I just learned where he usually went, and then I put myself in the right spots to encounter him. When I'd put together enough evidence to meet probable cause, I decided to arrest him."

"I take it that he didn't go quietly."

Esteban gave a bitter laugh. "He didn't. I knew he wouldn't, because he always had at least a kilo bag of crystal on him. That would put him away for ten years in Pelican Bay, easy. I chased him down a back alley, and he pulled a knife. He came at me, and I put three smoking holes in his chest. You know what the toughest part was?"

I shook my head.

"Knowing that I'd met him. That he'd once been an okay guy. He'd even brought a stack of *tortas* to one of my tía's holiday parties. After he attacked me, after I killed him, I didn't regret my actions. But I also found out something strange. That killing someone, no matter how evil they may be…can leave a hole inside of you."

We sat and looked at each other. I could hear songbirds trilling outside. The tingle of wind chimes on someone's porch next door. I slipped my hand into his.

"How do you deal with it?" I asked. "That hole. That feeling that's been bothering me."

“A long time ago, I asked myself something. Something I think you should also ask yourself.” I nodded assent, so he continued. “Think back to when you shot Nox, how you felt, right at the instant you pulled the trigger.”

I didn’t even need to close my eyes to evoke the memory.

“I’ve got it,” I said tightly.

“Do you feel hate for the person you killed?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Now for the real question,” Esteban said. He watched me closely as he added, “Was that all that you felt? Or was there the tiniest bit of something else in there?”

I blinked. Astounded, I gazed back into his copper-hazel eyes. “I do feel something else.”

“I thought there might be. When I killed the hielo dealer, I hated him, too. But I also felt love. I felt love for my cousin. Love for all the children who would grow up, strong and perfect and untainted, all because they would never meet this man I just erased from existence.”

“And I loved…” I whispered.

I barely knew Perrin, but I had loved him. I loved what he was. Bright, happy, smart, grateful to have met me. Innocent of evil.

Andeluvia had been a hard teacher. That world had shown me that life was so very fragile.

And now the darkness was coming, like a rising tide.

I pulled Esteban in towards me, ignoring the pain in my side. I kissed him passionately, felt the warmth in my lips light a fire inside of him.

“Not that I’m complaining,” he breathed, once we’d come up for air. “But what was that for?”

“Alanzo,” I said, as I ran my fingers along the lines of muscle in his chest. “I’ve never had so many things happen in my life that have been so wonderful. Or so terrible. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow. I don’t even know if I can fight fate. But I do know one thing.”

“What’s that?” he asked, as he wove his strong hand into my hair, cupping the back of my head, the way I liked it.

“I know that I can’t wait anymore. I want you in my life.”

This time he brought me in for a kiss. The warmth turned to wetness, making my skin tingle. Only, his voice was full of concern when we came up for air again.

“I’m still on Homicide, Dayna. I won’t know my schedule. I won’t know what kind of risks I’ll have to run. You understand that, don’t you?”

I gave him a sly smile. “Maybe that’s what will make it work. I don’t know if you’ll come back home safe every day. And you know that I can’t guarantee my own safety in Andeluvia anymore.”

“That’s true.”

I ran my lips along his cheek before I murmured in his ear. “But if you’re willing to take a chance on me, I’m more than willing to take a chance on you.”

He slipped his arms around me. “I’ll take that chance.”

I grinned as he stood, sweeping me off my feet in a move right off the cover of a romance novel. I nibbled at his neck as he carried me off to his bedroom.

What happened next was good.

Actually, what happened next was a *lot* better than good.

* * *

Dayna’s involvement with Andeluvia keeps getting more tangled. What does Albess Thea know that’s so shameful for her and the Hoohan? Has Dayna become a force to shatter some pre-ordained fate for her friends and their world? And how is she going to juggle a relationship with Esteban with all this going on?

At the start of Box Set 2 in the Fantasy & Forensics, a fiery phoenix appears in the King's throne room – and Dayna's called in to save the entire species! But will she heed Albess Thea's warnings of treachery even as she travels to the mysterious Vale of the Seraphine with her centaur, fayleene, and griffin companions?

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *A Perjury of Owls*, the fourth book in the 'Fantasy & Forensics' series. I've always enjoyed how 'fate', 'destiny', and 'prophecy' plays into fantasy series as varied as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*.

See how more of these themes play out in Box Set 2 by clicking here.

Michael Angel

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About Michael Angel

The worlds of Michael Angel's fast-paced thrillers, sci-fi, and fantasy range from the breakaway province of Ozrabek to the gritty 'Fringe Space' of the western Galactic Frontier. He's the author of the *Plague Walker Medical Thriller* series, as well as the bestselling forensics fantasy novel *Centaur of the Crime*, where C.S. Lewis meets CSI. His many books populate shelves in languages from Russian to Portuguese.

He currently resides in Southern California. Alas, despite keeping a keen eye out for globe-trotting epidemiologists, unicorns, or galactic marshals, none have yet put in an appearance on Hollywood Boulevard.

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